

11

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

The
Hero of
Salvation
and the
Age of
Demons
Act 2

Full clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with **Zero Believers**

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The Hero of Salvation and the
Age of Demons - Act 2

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"COME
ON, SIT
DOWN!"

Ira





"EVERYONE,
YOU ARE
NOW IN THE
PRESENCE
OF THE
GREAT
IBLIS."

Queen Nevia

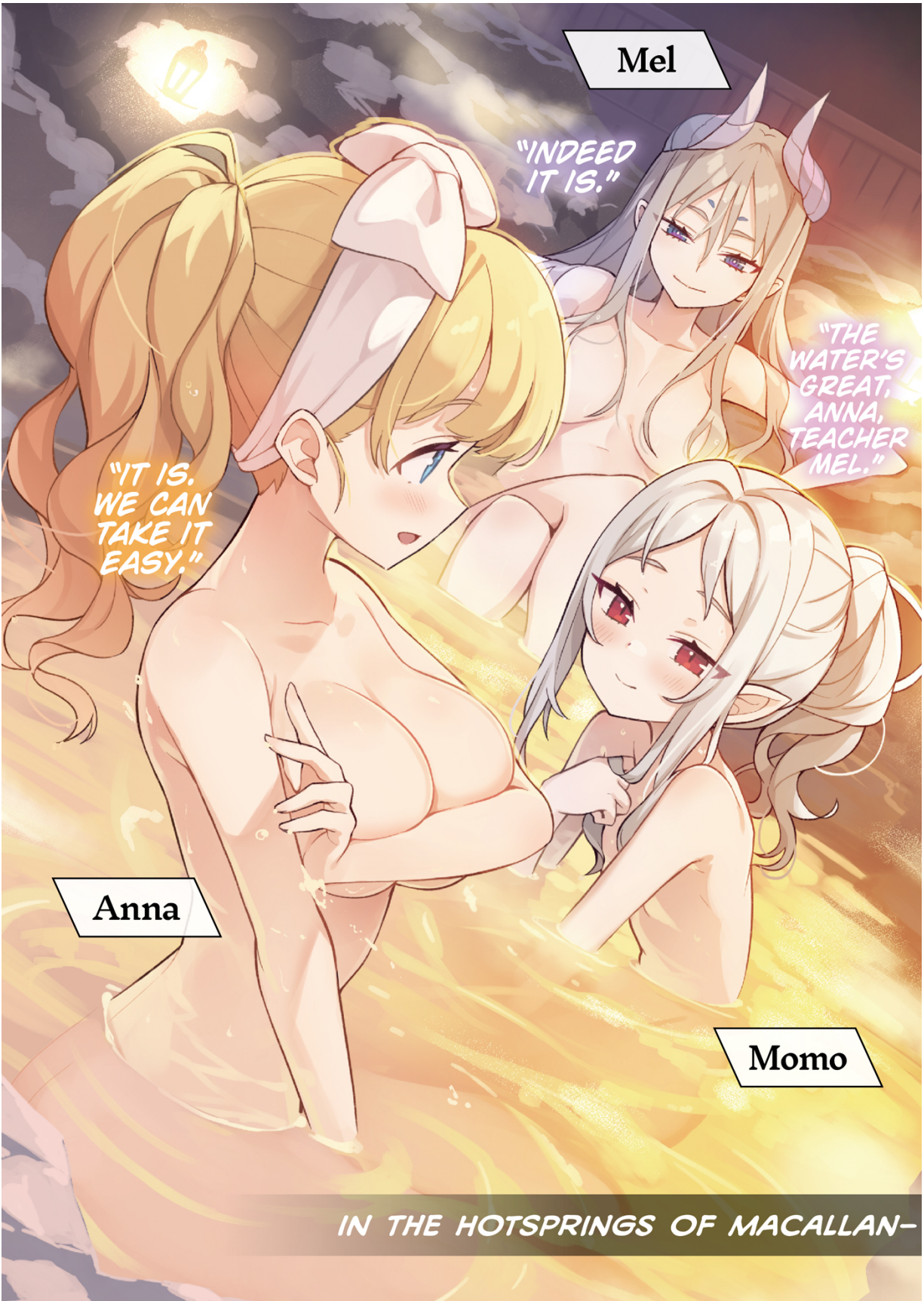
THE
HELL...?

I LOOKED AT
THE FIGURE IN THE
CENTER OF THE
TOWER AND
FROWNED.

A THRONE-LIKE
STRUCTURE RESTED
ON A Dais.

THE BEAUTIFUL
QUEEN NEVIA OF
LAPHROAIG,
THE WITCH OF
CALAMITY, STOOD
NEXT TO IT.

Makoto



Mel

"INDEED
IT IS."

"THE
WATER'S
GREAT,
ANNA,
TEACHER
MEL."

"IT IS.
WE CAN
TAKE IT
EASY."

Anna

Momo

IN THE HOTSPRINGS OF MACALLAN-

Characters



Makoto Takatsuki

A high school game addict who found himself in another world. As Noah's only disciple, he is determined to full-clear the world to save her.

People from the Past



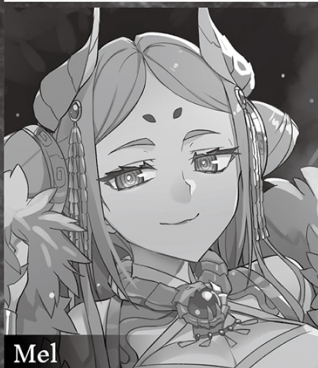
Momo

A shy girl who Makoto saved from Bifrons's human farm.



Anna

A saint and one of the members of the legendary party. Apparently, she is Abel the Savior's childhood friend...?



Mel

The white holy dragon who aided Abel the Savior. Boss of the deepest layer of Labyrinthos.



Johnnie

An accomplished elf warrior and the leader of the demi-humans. Lucy's great-grandfather.



Cain

Noah's believer from a thousand years ago. Also known as Demon Lord Cain, the hero-killer.

Highland

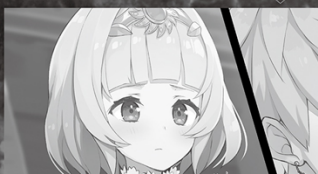
One of the leading powers on the western continent.

The largest country in terms of population, military strength, and financial strength.



Ryousuke Sakurai

Makoto's classmate and the Hero of Light. He has a strong sense of justice and is fighting against the demon lords.



Noelle

The Priestess of the Sun and princess of Highland. Sakurai's legal wife.



Grandsage

The best mage on the continent. Fought with Abel the Savior against the Great Demon Lord.

Makoto's Friends



Lucy

An elf from Springrogue who is good(?) with fire magic. Makoto's first party member.



Aya Sasaki

Makoto's classmate who was reincarnated as a lamia. She reunited with him in Roses's Labyrinthos dungeon.



Furia

The Priestess of the Moon who was once captured by Highland. She forged a guardian knight contract with Makoto.



Fujiyan

Makoto's classmate who founded the Fujiwara Trading Company in Roses.



Nina

A beastman fighter. Fujiyan bought her when she was imprisoned as a slave.



Dia

A water arch elemental with infinite mana. She aids Makoto.

Cameron

A powerhouse of international trade. They have many casinos and financial institutions.

Springrogue

The majority of the country is covered in forest. Many elves and beastmen live there.

Roses

A country blessed with many water sources. They are militarily behind the other countries.



Estelle

The Priestess of Fate. Has the ability to see the future and is thus very popular.



Rosalie

Lucy's mother, also known as the Crimson Witch. The strongest fighter in Springrogue.



Sophia

The Priestess of Water and princess of Roses. She gave Makoto the title of hero.

The Goddesses

The Sacred Deities currently rule the world after their victory during the last war. Seven goddesses have dominion: Sun, Moon, Fire, Water, Wood, Fate, and Ground.



Noah

One of the Titanea overthrown by the Sacred Deities. Currently trapped in the Seafloor Temple.



Eir

The Goddess of Water. One of the seven ruling deities. Despite her bright looks, she's actually a schemer.



Ira

The Goddess of Fate. One of the seven ruling deities. Proposed the Northern Front Plan to defeat the demon lords.

Map

The Demon Continent

● Royal Capital
Cornet

Laphroaig

The Demon Lord's
Castle

Labyrinthos



1000 years ago

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Prologue: A Hero's Worries

◇ Hero Abel's Perspective ◇

Two days had passed since Makoto and Lady Helemmelk had left for Labyrinthos, and my training was going nowhere. I prayed and prayed, but I couldn't hear any response from the goddess.

I let out a sigh. To try and clear my mind, I picked up my sword and began to practice. From somewhere nearby, I heard Momo cheering. "Yay! I did it!" I glanced over and saw that she'd just succeeded in a short-distance teleport.

"You're amazing, Momo. It took you so little time to learn a new spell."

She shook her head. "I've still got a long way to go. I can't do it unless I use the incantation, so my teleports won't be helpful in a real fight. Sir Makoto said that if you can't cast a spell without the incantation, it's useless."

"Maybe he's a little harsh," I mused. I thought her achievement was impressive for someone of Momo's age—Makoto was assigning her rather lofty goals.

"After that," she continued, "I'm learning *Serenity* and *Stealth*. Also, since I'm a vampire, I should be able to use *Transform* to turn into a mist or a bat, so I need to learn that too."

"What odd training." Wasn't she going to learn anything offensive? After all, she had the *Sage* skill, which should make her perfect for that role.

But when I pointed this out, she disagreed.

"According to Sir Makoto, I need to be able to *escape* stronger opponents first."

"But he's so strong, so why...?" I trailed off, only half asking the question.

"I know," she said. "Still, I'm sure that doing what he instructs is the best choice!"

Momo seemed to completely trust his words. I was jealous.

“He could give me some guidance as well...” I muttered. Before he’d left, I’d asked him what I should be doing. But he had just left me to it, asserting that there was nothing he could advise. Maybe it was because he trusted me? But I wanted to rely on him as well.

“I’d listen to whatever he said.” I remained lost in thought for a moment, but when I felt eyes on me, I snapped back. “Momo?”

She stared silently for a few seconds. “Why are you a girl now?”

“Huh?” I glanced down and found that I’d transformed into Anna.

“You thought of him and turned into a girl,” said Momo. “I knew it, you ___”

“U-Uh, Momo?” The look on her face was unnerving me.

“You love Sir Makoto, don’t you?”

“Wha?!” Her question made me drop my practice blade.

“I knew it...”

“Y-You’re misunderstanding, Momo!” I waved my hands around in a panic, but Momo just stared fixedly at me.



Just as I was trying to think up some excuse, a huge white dragon soared into the temple grounds.

Lady Helemmelk! They were back?

But when I turned to greet them, I noticed the lack of Makoto.

“Welcome back, Teacher,” said Momo.

I tilted my head. “Lady Helemmelk, is Makoto not with you?”

In contrast to our calm greetings, Mel yelled out in a panic, “Hero, with me! The elementalist was attacked by Demon Lord Cain!”

Momo and I both gasped as our expressions spasmed into fear.

In no time, Lady Helemmelk and I set off, rushing toward Makoto.

“Are you sure it was wise to leave Momo behind?” I asked. The girl had begged us, tears overflowing, to take her along. However, Lady Helemmelk had refused.

“We had no other choice—Makoto is facing a demon lord. More importantly, have you gained some measure of control over the attack that damaged Demon Lord Cain in Labyrinthos?”

“W-Well...” I stammered. The truth was, I hadn’t managed to use it except for that one time. It was a magic sword technique I’d wielded only by chance. Could I somehow summon it again to launch a strike against Demon Lord Cain?

“You are the only one capable of harming the demon lord!” Mel exclaimed. “We need to hurry!”

“R-Right!”

My grip tightened on my newly obtained sword.

Makoto...please be safe.

Several hours passed before Lady Helemmelk called out to me. “We’re here! This should be the place.”

I stiffened, feeling suddenly wary. I could see only the aftereffects of various magic attacks—shattered patches of earth and such. There were no signs of either combatant. *He couldn’t already be...*

“Hero, look!”

I whipped my head around and stared. Someone was over there.

“I see smoke,” I murmured.

Mel nodded grimly. “Let’s go.”

“We need to be careful.”

With bated breath, we approached the smoke.

“That smell...” Mel’s brow furrowed as we spotted a figure whose back was turned to us.

That’s...Makoto! Thank goodness, he’s safe.

“What are you doing, Elementalist?” Lady Helemmelk demanded sharply. At first, I didn’t understand why she was angry. But upon closer inspection, I saw that Makoto was...

“Oh, Mel, Abel. I was waiting for you two,” he said, turning around from where he was tending to some fish on a campfire. “Want some food?” I felt all the energy leave my body as I collapsed to my knees.

“Are you okay?! You weren’t hurt?!”

Momo clung to him, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I’m back, Momo,” he said, soothing her.

“What about the demon lord?!” she exclaimed. “I heard you got attacked by Demon Lord Cain!”

“Yeah, but Dia and I managed to drive him off.”

Momo was now full of energy and leaping around in happiness. “A-Amazing! I knew you were strong!”

Indeed, Makoto didn’t have a scratch on him from the battle.

Why did I even rush out after him...?

“Don’t push yourself too far, Elementalist,” said Lady Melemmelk. Her voice was weary. “I’m going to rest now.” At that, she retired to her bed. Well, she *had* rushed there and back without sleeping.

“How’s your training been going, Momo?” asked Makoto.

Momo giggled. “Watch! I can use *Teleport*! At least, if I use the incantation!”

“Wow! Nice one! That’ll come in handy when we fight the demon lords. We can add it to our strategy.”

“Praise me more!” She kept giggling. “Also, gimme a hug!”

“Well done, well done.”

The two of them continued playing around for a while. *They have so much energy...* All I’d done was ride on the back of Lady Helemmelk and yet I felt exhausted. So, I decided to follow her example and take a nap.

It was dark when I awoke. Lady Helemmelk and Momo were sleeping in their own beds. However, Makoto was nowhere to be found. I rose and left the temple, looking for him.

There he is...

Thousands of butterflies conjured using water magic were fluttering through the air. *Does he not even bother to rest? Does he always keep up his training like this? Even though he just fought a demon lord?*

“You’re awake, Abel?”

He shouldn’t have been able to see me, but he’d somehow managed to greet me before I could open my mouth.

“I just woke up. Also, please call me Anna when I’m like this.”

Recently, I’d spent all of my time in my avian form, so I was indeed Anna.

I walked over and sat at his side.

“Thanks for coming today, Anna.”

“I didn’t do anything, though.” The demon lord had vanished by the time Mel and I had arrived...and I’d been relieved. *Even though that monster took my mentor from me.*

“Oh, right,” said Makoto. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

My back stiffened with fear and anticipation about what he might say.

“O-Okay, what is it?”

In the end, it was nothing too bad. Apparently, in a week’s time, he was going to do some training at a place called the Seafloor Temple.

“Um...can’t you train here?” I asked hesitantly.

“There isn’t much water here,” he said casually, “so I may as well try somewhere else. Somewhere with plenty of it.”

He was going out of his way to train in a *dungeon*? One of the *last* dungeons?

“We only have a year to get stronger, so I need to train hard,” he insisted, his eyes gleaming in excitement.

Right... He was going off again. Far away. He never could sit still. And now I was just going to be waiting for him.

“Uh, Makoto, please listen to me.”

Before I knew it, I was squeezing the fabric of his clothes between my fingers and pleading.

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki

Trains...Even a Thousand Years Ago

“Makoto...please listen to me.”

Anna was close enough that I could practically feel her breath on me. Her expression was so desperate. This had to be something big, and I needed to listen. After all, my number one priority here was Hero Abel.

“What is it?” I asked. Had something happened? I’d assumed that the temple was a safe place to train, so I hadn’t been worried about any of us staying there.

I softly touched the necklace I was wearing.

Ira? Can you hear me?

I’m listening. It seems Hero Abel has some sort of problem.

Right. I’m going to talk it out, so give me advice, please.

Leave it to me.

She really was a goddess—I could rely on her.

As for the seemingly dire topic of conversation...

“If you’re going to the Seafloor Temple, you won’t be back for quite a while, will you?”

“I’ll come back every so often,” I replied. “Momo seems happier when she drinks my blood.”

“So...you’re coming back for *her*?”

“Huh?” What did that mean?

“You aren’t...worried about *me*?”

“Um...”

“You’ll be away while you’re at the Seafloor Temple, and you won’t be thinking about me...”

“I-I’ll be thinking about you too, Abel.”

“Anna.”

“I’ll be thinking about you too, Anna,” I corrected.

“Then take me with you!”

“I-I...can’t.” After all, I’d be with Demon Lord Cain. I definitely couldn’t take her with me.

“Why?! Do you not care?”

I was silent.

Ira, help! Mayday, mayday!

Okay, Makoto Takatsuki.

What do I say?! What do I do?!

Take her in your arms and kiss her.

I should...?

Huh... What?! Ira!

Annie’s looking a bit out of sorts, so you need to comfort her.

Um...but Hero Abel is a guy?

She’s a girl right now. Don’t sweat the little things.

I-Is this really a “little” thing? Also, she looks just like Princess Noelle, so I’d feel weird about that too. But I suppose it’s true that we need our hero in top form.

I returned my attention to the girl in front of me.

“Anna,” I said.

“Y-Yes?”

I took her hands in mine. “You should rest properly today. Tomorrow, we can train together. If you can get your *Hero of Light* skill working, a demon lord will be nothing.” After all, I had seen Sakurai take out Zagan with a single slash.

Anna peered up at me. “A-Are you sure?”

Makoto Takatsuki, said Ira. The Hero of Light skill in the future is an improved version of the one in this era. You can’t assume they’re the same.

Huh? Sakurai’s skill was stronger?

Well, the newest version’s always going to be the strongest.

O-Oh. So Hero Abel’s version was older...

My face twitched at that news, and Anna peered at me in concern.

“What’s wrong, Makoto?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking we should rest for tonight.”

“But I just woke up.”

“Let’s go, come on.”

“Uh, hey, Makoto. You, um, don’t need to push...”

Despite her protest, I pushed Anna into her bed and then collapsed into

my own next to hers. I gazed up at the ceiling and tried to come up with a training regimen for tomorrow. I couldn't think of anything decent.

The next day, Abel and I did indeed train together. Well, "training" might have been a generous word for it—I didn't know much about the *Hero of Light* skill, so the practice was more like trial and error. All I had as a reference was what I'd seen of Sakurai's skill in the future. And even though he was my childhood friend, we hadn't fought together much. The first time had been against the blight dragons in Labyrinthos, and the second against the King of Beasts—Zagan. I thought back to those fights.

He took them both down with a single strike...

They weren't particularly helpful memories. I only knew that sunlight was important. Being in caves or under the *Clouds of Darkness* limited the destructive and offensive power of the skill.

"Ab—"

"Anna."

"Right, Anna."

"Yup?!" With a smile, Hero-Saint Abel-Anna readied a sword.

"Can you turn the sunlight into mana?" I asked.

"Um...I'll give it a try."

She frowned, humming in thought as she gripped her sword tightly. An ominous noise grew around us as a huge amount of mana gathered in the sword. It began to glow.

"What's going on?"

"An attack?!"

Momo and Mel came rushing over.

"What do you think, Makoto?!" Anna asked.

"Hmm..." I put a hand to my chin as she showed me her shining blade.

"That's a lot of mana. Even an ancient dragon would die in a single hit."

"Anna's sword is scary..."

Judging by the expressions on Mel and Momo's faces, the magic sword she was holding *was* fairly impressive. But...

"It's not rainbow colored..." I muttered. When Abel had injured Demon Lord Cain, the sword had glowed with all seven colors of the rainbow. I was pretty sure it'd looked the same when Sakurai had killed Zagan.

"Elementalist, that would mean it possessed all of the alignments," Mel

explained. “And that is the domain of the gods.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. The *Hero of Light* skill makes it possible.”

“Um...” Anna trailed off. “I don’t even know that, so how do *you* know so much about it?”

I waved it off, using the excuse that Althena had told me while I’d been lost in thought. *What did Sakurai do exactly? To make strikes like that, he...*

“Anna, can you summon an angel?” I asked.

Right—Sakurai borrowed power from an angel when he defeated Zagan. Maybe that’s a good place to start?

But my suggestion garnered only three blank looks and exclamations of confusion. I didn’t think I’d said anything really weird. Surely channeling an angel was simpler than borrowing power from a goddess? After all...

“For example, I can technically summon angelly with Eir’s help.” I pulled out my dagger and started the activation.

“Fool! Stop, Elementalist!” shouted Mel. “How can you use such sacrilegious magic so lightly?! What will you do if these angelly attack *us*?!”

“Uh... I was just going to sacrifice one of the sheep around here. It’ll be fine.”

“You’ll be damned! Literally!”

Whoops, I’d made her angry. I’d only wanted to show Ab—*Anna* the real thing.

“You can summon angels?!” Anna asked in shock.

Mel shook her head. “No, Hero. What he was trying to do was use sacrificial magic—pay the price with someone else’s life in order to fulfill one’s own greed. Normally, without both a divine relic and technique, you need to pay for strong magic with your own lifespan.”

“Well, a goddess made this dagger, and Eir gave me the technique,” I pointed out.

Mel stared at me in shock. “Why are you wandering around with a treasure from the divine age?!”

Jeez. Apparently, using sacrificial magic whenever you feel like it is abnormal. I guess it’s a trump card Eir gave me, so I probably shouldn’t be using it so casually.

What should I do now?

Pray, said Ira. Anna is a priestess, so her prayers will definitely reach my sister.

But she's been doing that. She doesn't get an answer.

Well, that's a problem... Althena's probably busy with other things. After all, she's responsible for the whole solar system.

Th-That's huge! What about you?

I'm responsible for...this continent.

That's a completely different scale! Apparently, there were differences in power, even between goddesses. Noah was on par with Althena, right? She must be pretty impressive.

I told you—I'm no match for Noah. You make sure to pay proper attention to Annie.

Right, got it.

I turned my focus back to Anna. "Keep up with that magic sword technique, and keep praying to Althena. I'm sure she can hear you."

"But, Makoto..." She sighed, then nodded obediently. "Okay, I will."

Now that I think about it, this feels quite a bit like training with Lucy in Macallan. Her skill was powerful, but she couldn't use it at first. Unlike Lucy, who'd constantly slipped up with her magic, Anna was much more proficient.

Slow and steady, I guess? I decided we wouldn't rush—we just needed to keep training.

The next few days were spent practicing with Anna and checking on Momo's progress. Then, finally, it was time to leave—I'd promised to meet up with Cain tomorrow. Mel had agreed to take me there.

"Well, I'm off," I said.

"Come back soon, Sir Makoto."

"Take care, Makoto."

Momo and Anna saw me off as I departed for one of the last dungeons.



"This the place?"

"Yup, I'm sure of it."

Cain was standing uneasily at my side. He'd taken the helm off—I'd told him it was hard to speak with him when it was on—so I could now see his expression. Without all that metal in the way, his handsome face was on

display. Seriously, Cain was *really* attractive. If he changed his outfit, he'd probably look like a model or something.

The thing we were riding atop, however, was not so pleasant to look at: Cain's blight dragon. It was just as off-putting as ever, with its countless eyes and mouths, but...I could now see some charm to it. At least, if you peered closely.

Ira gagged. *You can't mean that. Do your eyes not work?*

That's harsh, Ira. Can't you see the avant-garde appeal it has?

Not at all.

Well...nor could I, really.

With a final warning to be wary of the demon lord, Ira cut off communication.

Incidentally, I'd gotten Mel to bring me to the rendezvous point a day early—I hadn't wanted her and Cain to bump into each other. After waiting overnight, Cain had arrived, and we'd safely embarked. We were headed to the Habhain Islands, which were close to the dungeon. Luckily, I had the location recorded with my *Mapping* skill.

"My liege...be careful."

Dia was behind me, watching the demon lord warily. I didn't think she needed to worry so much, though.

"We're nearly there," I said. "First things first—we need to decide where we'll set up camp!"

"Right..." Despite my excitement, the demon lord's voice was quiet.

"What's up, Cainhart?"

"Enough with that name!" he griped. "Actually... It doesn't matter. Noah said I could believe you. I will follow her words."

Whoa. Apparently, Noah had given him the go-ahead—we were clear to take a crack at the Seafloor Temple. Also, she'd easily figured out who I was.

"Makoto Takatsuki. You are her believer, but from a thousand years in the future."

I nodded. "Pretty much."

"So all of my proselytizing for her has been in vain?"

"As hard as it is to say...yes."

Cain's technique was more threatening than proselytizing. Either way, divine rules meant Noah couldn't have more than one believer. And, a

thousand years from now, she was seen as a wicked deity. That revelation had come as a shock to Cain.

“Well, it doesn’t matter!” I said. “If we can get her out, that’s that.”

“R-Right...”

I kept speaking brightly—Cain’s expression remained dark. We continued to discuss Noah until we landed at our destination.

The Habbain Islands were—in the future—a destination resort containing villas for nobles and royals of all countries. In this era, the islands were uninhabited. And though they were few in number, there *were* monsters living here. We would need to keep watch while here, so we found an easily defensible area and set up a simple camp.

“Let’s go!” I exclaimed.

“Right now?!” Cain asked in shock.

This expedition was going to last for two weeks. I was worried about leaving Momo and Abel for too long, so I didn’t want to waste any time.

“Well, the sun’s still up,” I pointed out.

“B-But isn’t it too soon?”

Well, he had piloted the dragon all the way here, so maybe he was tired. I shrugged. “Guess I’ll go on my own, then.”

“On your own?!”

“I’ll come back.”

“No, wait... I’ll come with you.”

And so, we both headed for the ocean. We left his dragon to guard camp. When we reached the shore, we leaped into the water with a splash. The sea around these islands was pleasantly warm. Colorful reefs lined the seabed, and fish of all hues darted around. It was peaceful here.

After getting our bearings, the two of us swam off slowly in the direction of the temple. Suddenly, I realized something—I turned to my side.

Cain was still wearing all of his armor. While underwater.

“Are you gonna be okay swimming in that?” I asked.

I was using *Water Talk* to make sure he could hear me...but there was no response.

“Helloooo?”

He opened and closed his mouth, but I couldn’t hear anything. With no other option, I grabbed his arm and cast the spell on him as well.

“Can you hear me?”

“Yeah...” he grumbled. “How’re you talking underwater?”

“Well, if we’re gonna attempt the dungeon, we’ll need to communicate”

“I know of spells for enhanced swimming and breathing water...but I’ve never heard of anything that lets you *talk* underwater.”

“Uh-huh. So, is that armor going to get in the way down here?”

“You needn’t worry. This armor is a divine relic gifted to me by Noah. It will never burden me.”

“I see.”

Well, that armor was his greatest strength, both offensively and defensively. Taking it off would, at best, halve his effectiveness. It was good that he wouldn’t sink or anything, but the armor did cause one little problem...

Cain swam too slowly. I wanted to reach Deep Scar today at the very least.

“I’m speeding us up,” I announced. I kept my hand on his arm and used *Water Magic: Flow* to propel us forward.

“H-Hey!”

“Don’t bite your tongue!” I warned.

“Wait—”

The fish swimming alongside us seemed to suddenly reverse, but a scant second later, we jetted away, leaving every other living thing behind.



“Wh-What’s with this speed?! You can move faster underwater than with flight magic?”

His voice sounded weak, and Dia sighed in exasperation. “Pathetic. This speed is hardly anything.”

Hmm. I honestly hadn’t thought it’d faze him either. We had far more difficult obstacles waiting for us.

“Sorry, Cain. I’ll go slower next time.”

“Y-Yes... Please do.”

He was Noah’s believer, and my single ally in this, so I was kinder to him than Dia had been. Still, we were going deeper. We slowly descended into the darkness. The temperature dropped, and I used magic to keep us warm. Before long, we were deep enough that the sunlight could no longer reach us.

I used *Night Vision* and *Scouting* to keep watch of our surroundings. A lot of mana flowed in the sea, which meant that many monsters were present.

“My liege. There is something ahead. Take care.”

“That’s...a whale, isn’t it?” I asked. “Well, a whale the size of a boat.”

“There’s also a megalodon watching us.”

“It’s far enough away—we should be fine. We’ll keep an eye on it, though.”

Cain looked between us, confused. “You two can see?”

“You can’t?” I asked.

“I could...if I was wearing my helmet,” he said awkwardly.

So he didn’t have *Night Vision*.

“Put it on.”

“Right...got it.”

Huh. He relies more on his equipment than I thought.

After slipping his helmet on, he immediately started thrashing, panicking.

“Wha—? The monsters down here are *that* big?!” He then asked a stream of questions about the danger all around us. However, he quieted down when I told him they were all wary of Dia.

An hour later, we arrived at the abyss. But of course, this wasn’t our destination—just the starting line.

“Temple’s this way.” I pointed to the gash in the seabed. It was several

meters wide and around a dozen kilometers long. According to legend, it was a scar on the planet, a lingering fallout from Titanomachy.

The common name for it was Deep Scar.

Within the crevice, it was like a whole different world. Deep Scar was part of a leyline, and it overflowed with power from the planet. The monsters inside were all strengthened to a whole other level. And at the deepest point—the Seafloor Temple.

“Let’s take a look, Cain.”

“W-Wait! You said we were just scouting today!”

“Yeah, that’s why we should peek inside.”

“That’s not what you said!”

“We haven’t even been attacked yet.”

“W-Well...I suppose so...”

I pumped a fist. “So let’s head in! Dia, keep an eye out for us.”

“Of course, my liege!” Dia answered immediately. Her enthusiasm was heartening.

Slowly, we dropped down into the gash. The monsters in the area must have been wary of Dia’s mana because none of them attacked us.

We’re being watched, though...

I felt the eyes of hundreds of sea monsters, all surveying the visitors—us. *Scouting* informed me that they were sea dragons. *This must be the Nest of Dragons.*

Cain’s grip on my arm tightened. “Makoto Takatsuki. There are a lot of monsters here...”

“Well, it’s the Nest of Dragons.”

“The Nest of Dragons?!” he yelped. “We should attack first!”

“We don’t need to fight unless they attack us.”

“But then it will be too late!”

“Don’t worry. It’s fine.”

Sense Danger wasn’t reacting at all. Dia yawned at my side, then actually addressed Cain for once.

“You’re supposed to be a demon lord. Surely you don’t need to be so timid.”

“But these are *natural* monsters,” Cain argued. “They have no connection to the demon army, so my presence is no deterrence.”

“Sure, but with that sword and armor, you don’t need to be scared of

monsters, do you?”

Cain didn't respond. Was he actually scared?

We sunk farther and farther into Deep Scar. Yet despite the depth, it started to grow brighter. This wasn't sunlight—there was magicite in the walls, glowing.

This was all mana.

The glimmer started out as faint points of light, but they gradually grew in number. It was like looking up into the night sky full of stars. The amount of mana in the water seemed to increase in proportion to the light. *This definitely feels like another world.*

“Pretty,” I murmured.

“Indeed, my liege. It is a pleasant place for elementals.”

I saw plenty of water elementals around. Dia's mana seemed to be growing as well. At this rate, there was very little chance that any monster would come to mess with us. Dia and I happily looked out at the scenery.

“Say...how far are we going?” asked Cain. “Is this not far enough for today?”

It seems that the demon lord is not much of a fan. But the place is so pretty...

Still, the question was valid.

“Hmm. Yeah. Let's head back up,” I decided.

Cain nodded vigorously. “Yes! Let's!”

“Aww, but I wanted to stay here longer,” Dia said, pouting.

She wasn't happy, but I thought we'd gotten plenty far for the first day.

And so, the three of us headed back to camp.

When we arrived, I cooked some dinner—fish I'd caught on the way back. Cain started the fire.

“Today was a warm-up, but tomorrow we can really go for it. We should go to bed early tonight,” I suggested.

Cain looked puzzled. “You...seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“I do?”

“Yes. I have never done such a thing before. I did not think it would be so tiring.”

As he spoke, he lay down, still wearing his armor.

“Hey, Cainhart, surely it's hard to sleep like that.”

He glared harshly at me. “You want to get me in my sleep while I’m defenseless?! I will not hand them over to anyone!”

“No, that’s not what I’m going for at all... We’re going farther into the scar tomorrow, so you should get as much rest as possible. If you’re sleeping first, I’ll keep watch. G’night.”

I turned away and started practicing my water magic.

“You...aren’t going to sleep?”

“Later,” I answered as I conjured butterflies of water. We were camping at the seaside, so there were plenty of water elementals. Maybe it also had something to do with the Seafloor Temple.

I looked up. The stars were so pretty. I trained for a while longer, and then...

“Makoto Takatsuki.”

“What is it, Cainhart?”

He paused for a moment. “It’s nothing. Until tomorrow.”

“Yeah. We’ll go even deeper.”

Silence. Eventually, his breathing transitioned, becoming soft and slow as he drifted off. It was the first night of the journey, so I didn’t sleep much at all. By the time I did get some rest, it was close to dawn.

And thus, the first day of our adventure came to a close.

◇ Momo’s Perspective ◇

Sir Makoto had gone away. He was off training in the “Seafloor Temple” or whatever. It was safe here at the Temple of the Sun, but I suppose *too* safe for Sir Makoto—he was harsh on himself, so he must have wanted to train under more difficult conditions.

“Haah... Makoto...”

Anna was a little ways away heaving erotic sighs. She was obviously smitten with him, but she’d never admit it.

My distracted demeanor soon caught the gaze of Teacher Mel. “Little one, is your head in the clouds?”

“N-No!” I exclaimed. “I’m practicing!” Immediately, I started chanting a spell. “*Wood Magic: Ivy Prison!*”

Roots burst from the ground and wrapped around the scarecrow we’d set up as a makeshift enemy. Even though it was rather basic magic, this spell

could capture even a dragon.

“I did it!” I cheered.

“Hmm. Your *Sage* skill is showing its worth yet again. You learn quickly.”

“Yay! But... How come I’m not learning attack spells?”

I was confused. Sir Makoto was aiming for us to fight Demon Lord Bifrons. The demon lord was a terrifying opponent, and also the one who’d turned me into a vampire. Surely I should be learning stronger, offensive spells?

“Many of Bifrons’s subordinates are undead,” Mel explained. “Usually, holy-aligned spells like *Sun Magic* would be the best counter, but...those types of magic aren’t suitable for you as a half-vampire. Controlling the battlefield will be more useful than just flinging attack magic.”

“Oh, I see...”

I sighed.

“Besides,” she continued. “We have a strategic mage on our side. We can leave the offense to him.”

“A strategic mage?” I asked, taken aback at the unfamiliar term.

“Elementalists used to be called as such. I suppose the name isn’t used anymore.”

Perhaps Anna’s ears had perked up at our conversation because she came over to join us. “You mean Makoto?” she asked.

I wondered the same thing. “Teacher Mel, what’s strategic magic?”

“Magic that focuses on destroying towns or entire countries...” Mel murmured. “It was also known as indiscriminate massacring magic.”

“Huh?!”

Anna and I looked at each other, shocked. That power sounded awful.

“Strategic magic destroys all, young or old,” Mel said solemnly.

“M-Makoto wouldn’t do that!” Anna protested.

“Right!” I nodded vigorously. “Sir Makoto is a kind person!”

Teacher Mel just sighed at our rebuttal. “It is not a matter of strategic magic being *able* to destroy on a massive scale. Rather, the issue is that a strategic mage is *unable* to avoid that outcome. Elemental magic is difficult to apply with any precision. It is a final resort that engulfs all, be they ally or foe. That is the core of elemental magic.”

“But Makoto hasn’t caught us in any bad spells—” Anna cut herself off,

and her eyes widened. “Oh...”

“Did you forget Labyrinthos, Hero? You nearly died because of that Undyne, did you not?”

Anna paused for a moment, then mumbled, “I did...”

“But he’s been really careful about that kind of thing ever since!” I protested.

Mel offered a small nod. “Indeed he has. He manages to use elemental magic in ways that don’t affect us...though that should be impossible.”

“I knew he was amazing!” I cheered.

Teacher Mel did not match my enthusiasm. She wore a conflicted expression. “The magic we manipulate is, fundamentally, an imitation of the gods’ miracles. Given how much power he possesses, he must have some kind of blessing.”

“But he said he didn’t believe in a god, right?” Anna asked, her tone stern.

Why did Anna’s words sound like a rebuke? I don’t really believe in any god either.

“Being a nonbeliever is one thing,” said Mel, “but that isn’t all. The goddesses that rule the divine realm *hate* elemental magic.”

Anna tilted her head, eyes brimming with curiosity. “They...do?”

I was just as curious. What did she mean by “hate”?

“Using elemental magic causes too much destruction to the environment. It’s like purposefully calling up a natural disaster. As time has passed, those with the ability have decreased in number, and the goddesses have stopped giving out the skill.”

“But Makoto was given his duty by Althena,” I pointed out.

“He certainly said so.” There was a frown on Teacher Mel’s face. She put a hand to her chin in thought, and several long moments passed. Eventually, she spoke again. “I believe he may not be of this world.”

“Not of this world?” Anna repeated.

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“I draw this conclusion based on a few observations,” Mel explained. “After speaking with him, I’ve realized that he seems somehow lacking in knowledge about the ways of our world. He also wields a form of elemental magic that seems almost mutated. These characteristics match perfectly with those of the otherworlders that appear every few hundred years.”

Anna gasped. “Makoto is—”

“An otherworlder?” I finished.

It wasn’t a word I’d ever even *imagined* hearing. I was struggling to keep up.

“This is just my assumption,” Mel reiterated. “I could well be wrong. If you are curious, then you should ask him yourself.”

“Aren’t *you* curious?” I wondered.

“I am. But if he decides not to say anything, perhaps it is better to let things remain hidden.”

“Hrm...”

I wanted to know. I wanted to know everything about him. *Okay! I’ll ask him about it all when he gets back.*

Oh yeah—he still hadn’t finished that book he’d been reading so often when we’d first met. In between bouts of training, I’d started to learn how to read. *Maybe he’ll let me borrow it someday.*

The following days were spent training and waiting for Sir Makoto to return.

“You seem forlorn, Anna,” I said.

“Ye— Gah! No...I just...”

“Just admit it already. You love him.”

“N-No! I respect him, but it’s nothing like that!”

“You were talking about him in your sleep.”

“Wha?! I-I wasn’t! I wasn’t, right? Momo!”

“Who knows?” I snickered. Honestly, all she’d done was let his name slip while she’d been dreaming. It was funny to watch her panic though, so I didn’t elaborate.

Finally, the day came when Sir Makoto was scheduled to return. Teacher Mel had gone out to fetch him. As I waited for them to get back, I fidgeted anxiously.

Then, I heard a noise.

He’s back! Anna and I rushed out to meet him, but the sight that greeted us was...unexpected.

His face was dark—his eyes were hollow. Anna and I were completely lost for words. *I’ve never seen him like this before...* His clothes, which usually looked so nice, were ragged. He meandered toward the temple,

dragging his feet.

“Um...Sir Makoto?” I called out hesitantly. He didn’t reply at all. Instead, he collapsed into his bed.

What happened?!

◇ Anna’s Perspective ◇

“Mmmm... Yeah, that ain’t happening. I’m not gonna be able to beat that,” Makoto grumbled.

He was still in his bed. It’d been a whole two days since he’d gotten back, and he’d been like this the whole time.

“Sir Makoto...are you thirsty?” Momo asked, her voice full of devotion. She held out a cup. “Here, have some water.”

“Mm. Thanks, Momo.” He took a sip and let her fawn over him.

Momo giggled. “Was it good? I’ll make breakfast this morning.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“No problem! After all, you’ve been pushing yourself this whole time. There, there.” She stroked his hair, cooing at him.

My, Momo is starting to dote on a man... Is this a good thing?

From behind us, an exasperated voice spoke up. “What’s gotten into you, Elementalist?”

“Lady Helemmelk,” I said, turning to her.

“This is *supposed* to be the man who will battle Demon Lord Bifrons a year hence! Pathetic...”

“Well, he’s like this because he had a terrifying experience at the Seafloor Temple—”

Mel cut off my defense. “I know, but he needs to get over it.”

She approached him, and before I could register what was happening, she delivered a swift kick. Makoto rolled off his bed and fell to the floor.

“Ow.” He was grumbling, but it didn’t look like she’d hurt him all that much.

“Teacher Mel! What are you doing?!” Momo demanded angrily.

“Enough spinelessness! Are you the man that forced me to follow you or not?!”

Makoto was silent for a moment, then said, “I’ll be up in a minute.” He stretched with a grunt and stood. Compared to his pallid complexion from a

couple of days ago, his face had much more color now.

“Um...Makoto?” I asked cautiously. “What in the world happened?” He hadn’t actually given all that many specifics.

“Ah, well, about that...” He scratched his cheek before launching into an absolutely ridiculous explanation.

“You...ran into the Divine Beast Leviathan...” Lady Helemmelk’s jaw hung open in shock.

“Is a divine beast that horrifying?” I asked.

“Well, it was pretty tough,” said Makoto, “but there was a bigger problem...”

“What?”

“I apologize, my liege...” Dia the Undyne materialized next to him. Her usual haughtiness was completely gone. She almost seemed smaller.

“There was...a barrier that blocked all elemental magic,” Makoto explained.

“Huh?!” Momo exclaimed. “Then what happened to *her*?!”

Dia reluctantly answered. “I couldn’t get close. The barrier was constructed by Neptus, and it refuses all elementals! Those damned Olympians! When our leader is back—”

“Okay, Dia, that’s enough!” Makoto exclaimed. He shoved his hands over her mouth and seemed to be panicking slightly.

Neptus was one of the higher gods—Althena’s uncle. *He* had put up a barrier against elementals?

“Um, well, since Dia can’t help, are you giving up on beating the temple?” Momo asked.

Dia screeched an inarticulate protest and lunged for Momo.

“Hey! It’s just the truth!” Momo argued.

Makoto sighed heavily. “Don’t fight, you two. I’m still going to try. I just can’t come up with any way around this. Not having elemental magic is too extreme.”

I noticed that his tone of voice seemed practically back to normal. Maybe he was fully recovered.

That was when Lady Helemmelk broke in. “Waitwaitwaitwait! E-Elementalist! Do you know what you’re *doing*?! That’s the Divine Beast Leviathan! A weapon used by the gods in the interstellar war! You can’t measure up!”

Momo and I stared blankly at her. I'd never heard of an "interstellar" war before. Was she talking about the Titanomachy fairy tale?

"I know. Ir—a goddess told me." His face twisted in disgust.

"Apparently, Leviathan has the capability to alter the sea level of the entire planet. It was one of the three main offensive powers used in that war. I didn't think I'd be able to *fight* it. Just, y'know, slip past or something."

"'Think' my tail!" Mel said angrily. "That *thing* fought even the Titans and outer gods! A demon lord would be *nothing* in comparison!"

"And unfortunately, I found that out firsthand..." Makoto mumbled.

"Well, I'll do my best not to cause you any issues."

"Enraging it would destroy the world! What were you thinking?"

"Don't worry, I won't go picking a fight."

"Really?" Mel looked at him suspiciously. "Fine, then."

I couldn't follow their conversation entirely, but I could at least understand one thing—Makoto had faced an extremely powerful adversary, and yet he still hadn't given up on his goal.

Makoto straightened and turned to Momo. "Let's get some training in, shall we?"

"Aww, let me pamper you more," she whined. "Look, you can lie in my lap."

"I can't sleep any more. I've already had at least a week's worth."

Momo smiled. "Awww, you're *really* back now"

"How were things while I was gone?" Makoto asked.

"Hee hee hee. Just you wait. It's been going perfectly—you'll be surprised!"

The two of them kept talking as they walked off.

"For the love of..." Lady Helemmelk sighed in relief as she sank down in a chair and started brewing herself some tea.

I hesitated, not knowing what to do, but I eventually decided to follow Makoto and Momo to their training spot. I could hear their voices coming from outside. However, once they came into view, I was immediately taken aback.

"Uh?"

"*Clone! And...Teleport!*"

Momo split into seven copies of herself and then proceeded to break the laws of physics over her knee. That is, she teleported. Over and over, the

clones attacked Makoto.

I can only barely follow what's going on! When did Momo get so good with her magic?!

What came next was even more incredible.

“*Water Magic: Water Gaol*,” Makoto cast. He showed not a single hint of concern about Momo’s onslaught. Water rapidly rushed around him and caught all seven of the Momos.

“Gyah! *All* of them?! I attacked from your blind spot, though! How?!”

“That was close—pretty good offense, Momo.”

“It wasn’t close at all! How’d you do that?!”

“Well, I used my 360-degree vision and *Mind Accel*. Also, I can deploy my water spells quickly.”

“Mrrghm, I thought I’d manage to surprise you!”

“You did.”

“No, I didn’t, not even close! You watched my ultimate move without even blinking!”

“That’s fine,” Makoto assured her. “Not even the gods can break my *Calm Mind*.”

“Considering how down in the dumps you were after a little setback in the sea, I doubt that!” Momo said petulantly.

“Don’t be like that!”

As they spoke, Momo launched off a *Thunderbolt*.

She cast that so quickly!

“Not good enough, little one,” Dia said, appearing at Makoto’s side to brush the lightning away.

That was supposed to be an ultra rank skill! But Dia brushed it aside like it was just some falling leaf!

Momo’s attacks continued to grow in breadth—Makoto casually sidestepped each one. He was smiling, obviously pleased by her growth.

H-Huh. Momo got really strong...

Makoto was obviously the strongest, but Lady Helemmelk was an accomplished spellcaster and had the power of an ancient dragon. W-Was I the weakest in the party?

I shouldn’t have been worrying about him! At this rate, I’ll just be a burden!

After that, I spent a lot of time training with my magic sword.

“Aren’t you sleeping?” I asked.

Despite the late hour, Makoto was still training his water magic.

“I slept yesterday. I’ll be fine.”

“U-Uh...okay?” Was he kidding? It didn’t sound like it, and that made it all the scarier.

“Phwaaahhh...” Dia yawned. “I’m heading to sleep, my liege.”

“Sure. Night, Dia.”

See, even *she* was sleeping! Momo had long since passed out as well. A vampire being early to bed and early to rise didn’t seem quite right... Lady Helemmelk had a proper sleep schedule too. Makoto was the one with the most inhuman sleep patterns.

“How is your training going, Ab—Anna?”

I gulped at the question. I was still thinking of how to answer as I sat down by his side.

“Anna?” He sounded confused. I leaned slightly into his shoulder.

“Honestly, I’m at a loss,” I admitted weakly, resting my head on him. I wondered if he might put an arm around my shoulders, but he didn’t. He did, however, stop his casting and look down at me.

“I heard you can use *Sword of Light* now.”

I let a few seconds of silence pass, then murmured, “I can. Only for a few seconds, though.”

That was the one attack that had worked on Demon Lord Cain in Labyrinthos. When I was in the sun, I could muster up *just* enough for a single strike. After that, I had to wait a while before I could use it again. It honestly seemed like the skill would be all but useless in a real battle.

Makoto seemed to think differently, though. A wicked, scheming grin spread across his face. “That’s enough.”

“Enough?” I didn’t understand. Surely a few seconds of *Sword of Light* would be of little use.

“Johnnie and the others will deal with the demon lord’s subordinates. As for his aides, Setekh and Sciulli, well...Mel and I will deal with them. So the only real issue is Bifrons. I *could* borrow power from Dia and her sisters. Lower my lifespan again.”

“Um, Makoto?”

“Look, you just need to be ready to use the *Sword of Light*. I’ll make

sure the demon lord can't dodge."

I was silent. Was he being serious?

The words "You're kidding, right?" nearly passed my lips, but the look on his face stopped them in my throat. There was no hint of levity in his eyes, nor any eagerness. This whole situation just...wasn't a big deal to him. That's what his gaze was telling me.

What in the world *was* he? He was different from anyone I'd ever met. It felt like he—and he alone—saw this demon-infested world in a different light.

My heart pounded.

I'd been thinking about him the entire time he'd been away. And after he'd returned, I hadn't been able to keep my eyes off him.

Since the death of my mentor, I'd been crying myself to sleep every night. But...that hadn't been the case recently. Instead, I thought of *him* and felt myself calm down.

Momo had teased me, and I'd denied it. *I...might not be able to keep that up, though. If we win...I'll say it...but...*

For now, I'd focus on my duty. I would master *Sword of Light*, the technique that no one else could use. With that, I'd fulfill the dearest wish of the woman who had raised me: hand this continent back over to the humans.

If that happens, I'll tell Makoto how I feel.



In the year that followed, Momo and I trained as much as we could.

Lady Helemmelk taught us magic. I used memories of the Hero of Fire to bolster my swordplay, and I prayed to Althena. Momo got stronger and stronger. Makoto helped Momo with her training and offered me advice. Occasionally, he ventured to the Seafloor Temple.

The days passed until it was finally time...

Time to bring the fight to the demon lord.

Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Challenges a Demon Lord

A whole year had passed at the Temple of the Sun, and now, we were back in Labyrinthos.

“Johnnie, there are so many more people!” I couldn’t help but exclaim.

He gave a satisfied nod. “Indeed. The ancient dragon presence keeps the city safe. Many people in the area heard the rumors and have sought refuge here.”

I gazed out upon the dungeon town, which now took up the entirety of the lake’s shore. It was now even bigger than Macallan.

When Julietta saw us, she rushed over energetically. “Momo! It’s been so long! Are you doing well? You’re so big now!”

“It’s good to see you again!” Momo smiled but paused a bit awkwardly. “Um, I can’t grow anymore, though.”

“Oh, right.” Julietta chuckled. “You’re a vampire.”

Volf had also strolled over, and his eyes caught on a rather conspicuous member of our group. “So...” he said hesitantly. “Are you really Abel?”

“I’m Anna, not Abel!”

“G-Got it. I heard from Olga that there was something special about you...but I never imagined that you were a woman...”

“Just so you know, I’m even better with a sword now, regardless of what my body looks like!”

Volf grinned. “Oh-hoh! Then how about a proper spar?”

“Sounds good!”

Glad to see those two having a warrior’s reunion. Everyone else seems so happy to see each other again.

Meanwhile, Mel and the other ancient dragons were chatting in their human forms.

“Mother! You have returned!” exclaimed one of the ancient dragons.

“I have,” Mel said. “Are you in good health?”

“Indeed! There have been no changes to our dwelling! You’ll be returning to the deepest layer now, right?”

“Hm? Well, the elementalist has plans to fight the demon lord, so I am going to join—”

The other dragons cut her off with adamant protests.

“Foolishness! What’ll happen if the dragon king hears of this?!”

“But...”

“Please reconsider, mother!”

“Exactly! You have already discharged your debt!”

“Please come back! There is no need for us to involve ourselves with surface struggles!”

“Mother!”

Mel frowned. “Hmm...”

Yikes—that’s a lot of complaints for her to deal with. And I’m probably the person causing them.

Mel had helped us a lot over the past year, but her absence had apparently worried her family. Future legends stated that the holy dragon had aided Abel until Iblis had been slain, but the past was now different than it once was. Considering all the pleading dragons before me, Mel could very well choose to return to the dungeon’s depths. How much could I involve her in the fight? It was a real concern.

I looked around the completely altered dungeon once again. The lake was lined with stalls and stands both big and small. Children were running around, all with smiles on their faces. *Are we really inside a dungeon right now?* This didn’t feel like the same place where Lucy and I had nearly died to a swarm of monsters. Was this development going to change the future?

“Of course it will, you idiot.”

“Hwah?!”

I whipped around in shock. Standing behind me was a beautiful girl. A familiar one. She wore bright, colorful clothes.

“Wh-Why are you here?” I stammered.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Makoto Takatsuki,” Estelle said imperiously, hands on her hips.

Ira’s definitely in the driver’s seat.

“Ah, Lady Estelle *did* want to discuss something with you,” Johnnie remarked. “Sir Makoto, when you are ready to depart for battle, come and

speak to me. I will be prepared.”

With those parting words, he turned to leave. He didn’t smile, just smoothly strolled away. His long, tied-back hair swayed behind him. *The hakama-like pants... The long katana at his waist...* He was the spitting image of a samurai. It was almost...artistic.

“Thank you, Johnnie,” I called out to his back.

He turned his head slightly and offered a small smile.

So cool...

Then, there was a huff from next to me.

“You have some nerve to ignore me.”

“My apologies, Est—Ira. Why are you here, by the way?”

“Because I need to talk to you, of course. Follow me.”

She grabbed my arm and yanked, dragging me off to a more private location.

That “private location” ended up being a cave behind a huge waterfall. There was no one around besides Ira and me, and the only ambient noise was the pleasant crashing of falling water. It was the perfect spot for a private conversation.

Also, this place makes me remember meeting Sasa again. Feels like so long ago...

“Why are you getting lost in sentiment?” Ira demanded, flicking me on the forehead.

I fell to one knee in front of her. “Apologies, Goddess.”

“Hmph. I was concerned, so I came to see how things were! Be grateful. You changed the history of Labyrinthos so much—I’ll have to fix it later. It’s a real pain!”

“So I *did* change things...” Well, I’d never heard of a huge town in the middle of Labyrinthos. Were Sasa’s lamiae ancestors going to be okay?

“That isn’t any of your concern, Makoto Takatsuki. What are your plans to fight the demon lord?” Her sharp eyes pierced me. “Can you win?”

I chuckled. “Leave it to me. We’re more than ready.” After all, we hadn’t spent the last year playing around.

For some reason, Ira shot a lidded gaze my way. “I wonder about that...considering how many times you tried to get into the Seafloor Temple. What did you think would happen if you died?! You didn’t even *accomplish*

anything!”

“Well, my attempts at the temple might not have gone well, but they were worth doing. I did manage to come to an agreement with *him*.”

“Well...you’re right. Impressive.” Her expression was a mix of exasperation and amusement. “But enough of that. Tell me your strategy for defeating Demon Lord Bifrons. I’ll check it over.”

“Oh, sure. First, I’ll go ahead of the group and get things ready—”

A voice suddenly interrupted us.

“Excuse me!”

Someone else had ventured behind the waterfall.

“Mel?”

“Oh, Mellie.”

The person was indeed Mel, whose eyes were now wide in shock. *She must have finished talking with the others.*

“I felt divine mana, so I came to listen, despite the disrespect...” Mel said meekly. “Are you...the goddess Ira?”

Ira and I exchanged glances.

“Um, well if you could—” Ira said.

“I won’t breathe a word of it!” Mel exclaimed. “To be able to meet you again is...” Mel rarely seemed flustered by anything, but she was clearly overwhelmed right now.

Oh yeah—she said that Ira helped her in the past, didn’t she? I vaguely remembered her mentioning that. As I dug up that memory, Mel turned my way. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

“So you’re *Ira’s* apostle.”

We stared at each other, sharing a moment of confusion.

Nope... I’m Noah’s.

“Well, you’re acting so *familiar* with the goddess. It all makes sense now. I will convince my family that I am following the guidance of Ira’s apostle. My apologies for interrupting your conversation. Please, continue.”

With that abrupt promise, Mel turned and left.

Ira and I just looked wordlessly at each other.

“So, will you become my believer now?”

“Not a chance,” I said flatly. “Besides, you should have others, right?”

“I don’t. Not *that* kind of believer anyway. Althena forbade the use of the *full* believer system.”

“Forbade it?”

That was the first time I’d heard that. There were certainly heroes and priestesses, but now that I thought about it, none identified as *believers* or *apostles* in the same way I did. Cain was the only one I’d met.

“Heroes and priestesses can hear their goddess’s voices, but a believer can *see* the divine,” Ira explained. “Yet when a mortal gazes upon a god, it usually causes at least some mental disturbance...”

“Mental disturbance?”

“Corruption. Put simply, mental instability.”

“I’m fine, though.”

“That’s because you’re weird.”

“Rude.”

Ira huffed. “*You’re* calling *me* rude? Mellie said it earlier, didn’t she? You’re too familiar with us goddesses. Why’re you looking down on us? C’mon, on your knees!”

Ira pushed down on my head. She might’ve been small and relatively weak, but my stats were even lower, so I lost easily.

“No way!” I protested. “There’s only one goddess I’ll kneel like that for!”

“Oh? Guess I’ll *make* you submit, then.”

“That’s not funny!”

Ira giggled. “That just used up the last of my kindness! Lick my feet!”
She’s a sadist! A sadist goddess!

“No way! I’ll only lick *her* feet!”

“What are you, a pervert? Also, you’re so weak.”

“Stop it!” I shouted.

Resistance was futile—Ira was soon on top of me. *Seriously, I am weak...*

“Caught you. Now, submit,” Ira insisted, pinning me.

“Guh, just kill me!”

She giggled again. “So you’ve resigned yourself to your fate, Mako—”
That was when our messing around was abruptly cut off.

“Makoto?”

“Sir Makoto... What are you doing?”

Only Ira and I should have been here...but Anna and Momo’s voices interrupted us.

Silence—barring the crash of the waterfall—reigned.

“Y-You’ve got the wrong idea—”

“It’s not—”

Both Ira and I tried to explain, but we were cut off once again.

“You idiiiiioot!”

“Moron!”

Both of them rushed away. Ira and I were left gaping.

“You’re the center of their party!” Ira exclaimed. “This is bad, isn’t it?!”

“You tell me! I thought you could see the future!”

“Everyone makes mistakes!”

“Ira, you’re supposed to be a goddess!”

The two of us spent a while trying to assign blame. We never did come to an agreement, but we ended up following after the other two and eventually managed to explain the situation. *I think.*

And thus, our preparations for the battle with Demon Lord Bifrons proceeded...steadily?

◇ Momo’s Perspective ◇

“Um, Sir Makoto, are you sure it should be just the two of us?”

We were approaching Bifrons’s castle. Alone. Teacher Mel, Anna, Julietta, and the other warriors would be following us later. Still, I was worried about infiltrating with just two people. After all, the enemy waiting for us was the demon lord who ruled the entire continent.

“We got some good rest in Labyrinthos and the weather’s great,” he replied. “There’s no real need to worry, is there?”

Sir Makoto—the core of this plan—was almost disgustingly cheery. *I love him, but...can’t we do something about the weird way he views the world?*

“How’s this *good* weather?” I asked incredulously. “It’s pouring rain.” The static pitter-patter of raindrops was annoying, and the storm limited visibility. I couldn’t understand how this could possibly be “pleasant.”

Just then, Dia the Undyne appeared in the air next to Sir Makoto. “Little one, *I’m* making it rain.”

“I know that, Dia.”

She had an attitude...but also the strength to back it up. Even Teacher

Mel had admitted that she couldn't hold a candle to the Undyne's power. I was even less in comparison, but I didn't like the way Dia monopolized the space around Sir Makoto.

"Why did you make it rain?" I asked him, putting my arm through his. Dia did the same on his other side.

"I'll explain when we get there. Essentially, it's part of the plan."

He sounded like he was having fun...even though we were about to fight a demon lord. His attitude and mannerisms were shockingly normal.

"Yeah, I got that," I grumbled. "But I still don't understand why I can't help fight the demon lord!" I'd trained like crazy but he still wasn't allowing me to help. *Not fair.*

"There's not much we can do about it. According to Ira, you could get bound again if you get near Bifrons."

"But...that doesn't mean..."

"Abel, Mel, and I wouldn't hurt you if you turned against us. *I* definitely couldn't. So, to avoid that outcome, I want you in a supporting role. If anybody becomes too injured to fight, I want you to teleport them away from the battle."

I griped some more but finally agreed, albeit reluctantly. *I can't say no when he puts it like that.*

"Hmph, I'll take care of my liege, so we won't need you," Dia insisted.

"What was that?!" I exclaimed. "Sounds like big talk coming from someone who was *useless* in the Seafloor Temple!"

"Y-You don't know! You weren't even there! Anywhere else, I'm incredible!"

"Hmph! But I know that's where Sir Makoto most wants to go!"

"Sh-Shut up. You're just a little girl!"

"Wha?! And *your* body's made out of water, so you can't do anything!"

Dia giggled smugly. "If I *Synchro* with my liege, there's *all sorts* we can do..."

"I-If I wanted, I could—"

"All right, enough," Makoto said, covering my mouth. "Monsters have shown up."

My eyes frantically darted around, looking for them. There—in front of us was a massive undead ogre. Well, not anymore. It was now just an icy sculpture of an ogre. Sir Makoto must have frozen it.

“Keep the noise down,” he scolded.

Dia and I chorused our quiet agreement. I shot another glance at the frozen statue. Thanks to all my training with Teacher Mel, I was now sure of something: Sir Makoto could cast his magic very quickly. Too quickly. And on top of that...

I glanced around. The downpour was constant, but despite that, not a mote of rain touched us. Droplets seemed to skitter away from our bodies like living creatures. The same was true on the ground—despite all the mud being churned up by the rain, the dirt beneath our feet was firm and easy to walk on. Actually, it almost felt like the water was pushing us along. *What a strange situation.*

This phenomenon was no mystery, though—Sir Makoto was using water magic to control both the rain and the standing water. That was why none of us were wet and why we could just stride over the sodden ground. Not one splash of water touched my skin, nor one irregular raindrop. The rain itself was something his magic had created, and the downpour spread as far as I could see. How large of an area could he affect with his magic? *Who knows?* I didn’t understand how he was capable of it. However, I had come to a singular realization—I’d probably never be able to do the same thing.

Sir Makoto glanced down at me, looking worried. “Momo, what’s up?”

“Nothing. What’s this spell called, by the way? The one making it rain?”

“Hmm, it doesn’t really have a name. I’m just making water fall from the sky. You could do it too.”

“Not over such a large area! You’re keeping us dry too! It must be so complicated.”

“If you imagine the rain ‘not hitting’ us, the drops will do just that, right?”

Not happening... I didn’t understand at all. His way of thinking completely circumvented the fundamentals of magic that Teacher Mel had taught me.

You just think something...and it happens? Was that a spell a *human* could use? Wasn’t that more like one of the gods’ miracles?

I stared at his back. It wasn’t broad by any means, but it was the most reassuring sight I could think of.

I need to keep up with him. I won’t be left behind.

But I couldn’t comprehend the way his mind worked. Not yet. I’d have

to do my best to understand.

◇ Anna's Perspective ◇

We left Labyrinthos three days after Makoto and Momo. The mist was thick, and it was hard to see where we were going, but we slowly pushed through. Johnnie, the leader of the dungeon town, forged the path ahead, and we followed.

Volf, Julietta, Deckel, and the other dungeon town warriors were with us, along with Lady Helemmelk and her family. Our forces numbered close to a thousand—it was by far the largest formation I'd ever seen. Never before had such a formidable fighting force been assembled on the side of humanity. Usually, we were hiding from the demons, moving in secret with a scant few people at a time. But things were different now. We'd regrouped enough to challenge the demon lord. All of us were in top condition, ready to fight.

Teacher...we'll manage it this time, I thought with quiet certainty.

"This mist is dense," Lady Helemmelk remarked. "We don't need to worry about the demons spotting us."

"The water elementals are overjoyed. Sir Makoto's elemental magic is always a sight to behold," said Johnnie.

Mel nodded. "I had worried over how we could move so many troops to the castle without being detected. Yet...to create enough mist to completely cover the Great Forest..."

"It's a good technique. Though I must admit, only *he* could manipulate the weather so freely."

"He is the only elementalist capable of altering the weather on this scale."

"We elves have a lot of elementalists...but Sir Makoto is on another level."

Mel and Johnnie were both praising the spellcraft, but...

"Aren't you worried about them?" I asked. "Makoto and Momo are heading to the castle alone."

I'd desperately sought to go with them, but Makoto hadn't wanted that. He'd said that my role was to defeat the demon lord, so I should come with everyone else. He'd then told Lady Helemmelk and Johnnie to try and

avoid any fighting on the way. Usually, he didn't say things so directly, so I was rather taken aback at the oddly blunt (for him) instructions. Why had he been so harsh?

Maybe he's worried? No. He and Momo were the ones we should be worried about. The monsters near the castle were strong, and I couldn't help but imagine the worst.

"Worried? About the elementalist?" Mel asked. "It would be a waste of time."

"Indeed," said Johnnie. "You can tell by the overall temperament of the elementals. They're relaxed—he's practically out on a stroll."

Neither of them seemed the least bit concerned. They emphasized that we should focus more on ourselves.

I groaned internally. *Really wish I'd gone with those two...*

After several days of travel, we spotted it—a huge black fortress looming in the distance.

Demon Lord Bifrons's castle.

Our previous attempt at infiltrating the castle had ended in failure. After they killed our party leader, we felt overwhelmed, and the demon lord had captured us. Then, just before our planned execution, Makoto had saved our lives.

This time, though...

I breathed in quietly. My nerves were definitely showing on my face. Up ahead, some of our troop members were talking, and I caught snippets of the conversation.

"Wha! What the—?"

"Quiet down, Julietta."

"Hoh. That must be the elementalist's doing. So *this* is his strategy."

"Well, it *is* a fundamental way of sieging a castle... A rather bold move, though."

What had happened? I walked over to them and squinted toward the castle.

"I..."

That half-witted word was all I could manage. *N-No way. Makoto...?*

The demon lord's castle...was submerged in a huge lake. All I could do was stare dazedly at the sight.

What the...?

The castle was not built in a valley or basin. In fact, it was situated on flat, wide-open plains. How, then, had the castle and its town been covered in water?

Suddenly, we heard a quiet noise, and a girl appeared out of thin air. “Oh, you’re all here!” the girl said brightly.

It was Momo. Apparently, she’d well and truly mastered teleporting.

“D-Did Makoto do this?” Julietta stuttered.

“It’s rather intriguing,” said Lady Helemmelk. “I assume the elemental is responsible?”

Momo broke into a smile. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?! He made this river overflow, and it flooded the castle! The demons in the town have had to evacuate, and most of the army is busy repairing the river’s burst banks.”

We were all struck dumb by her statement. She and Makoto—a mere two people—had caused enough havoc to splinter the demon lord’s army.

“An attacker with command over water is certainly a powerful ally,” said Johnnie. “I have to admit, I was concerned over its efficacy on the undead, but...I can understand the benefits of splitting our enemy’s forces.”

Out of everyone, Johnnie was the only person still calmly analyzing the situation. He was both an accomplished mage and a sword fighter, and he understood Makoto’s strategy. *Actually, Johnnie’s kind of a strange person too, isn’t he?*

Volf nodded. “In that case...” He didn’t need to continue—the undercurrent of excitement in his voice spoke for itself.

I felt the same. This time... This time would be different.

“Wait!” Julietta called out. “Before, when we got close to the castle, Demon Lord Cain attacked us. We can’t let our guard down.”

I jolted at that. She was right—Demon Lord Cain had been our downfall. The hero-killing demon lord in black armor seemed to appear almost at random, so it was entirely possible that he could show up here.

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

Those words immediately drew everyone’s attention.

“Lady Estelle?”

She had accompanied us from Labyrinthos. Lady Helemmelk had been against it since this battle would be dangerous, but Lady Estelle had insisted that she would be fine.

“Demon Lord Cain will not be present,” she said crisply.

Huh. I suppose she must have seen the future.

“Additionally, Setekh—the demon lord’s aide who possesses the *Eyes of Petrification*—will also be absent. Of course, there are other strong demons among Bifrons’s subordinates, but not having to deal with those two ought to be a significant boon.”

Everyone let loose a cheer. Could things really be going this well?

Beside me, Mel and the priestess Estelle were having a whispered conversation.

“Um...” Mel murmured. “Are you certain? Can you be utterly assured of such things?”

Lady Estelle balked at her words. “Wh-What are you trying to say, Mellie? Are you doubting me?!”

“N-No! Not at all, just... One of the core tenets of *Fate Magic* is that it lacks one hundred percent certainty, yes? I believe Goddess Ira herself once told me that.”

The Priestess of Fate, Estelle, was another strange person. We’d first met her in the capital of Laphroaig, and for a second time when she’d shown up in Labyrinthos. Well, that *should* have been the second time. But despite barely knowing her, she and Makoto seemed rather close.

“Just trust me. We can be sure of this...” Lady Estelle trailed off, then spoke once more in a barely audible whisper. “At least, he promised.”

“Pardon, but what did you say?” I asked. Mel and I hadn’t quite caught the tail end of her statement.

“N-Nothing!” she exclaimed. “More importantly, where is Makoto Takatsuki?”

Right... We hadn’t seen him yet.

“I’m here.”

I yelped, jumping back and nearly falling over. Someone had appeared suddenly from the mist at my side. No, wait... The mist itself had become a person.

“Makoto! Don’t surprise me like that!” I protested.

“Ah, sorry, Anna.”

That was really shocking! He smiled at me, not seeming chagrined in the slightest. At least it seemed like he was doing okay. It had only been a few days, but seeing his face filled me with relief.

“That was a rather odd spell, Elementalist,” said Mel. “How did you do

it?”

“Oh, I combined my water magic with *Transform* and turned myself into mist. It’s not as fast as Momo’s *Teleport*, but it’s pretty useful.”

Lady Helemmelk seemed interested, but Lady Estelle seemed much more put out.

“Becoming mist? That’s a vampire’s specialty... Surely you don’t need to use that kind of spell.”

“Well, I got bored while we were waiting, so I had Momo teach it to me.” Makoto’s eyes scanned our forces. “You sure brought a lot of fighters. Thanks for your help, Johnnie.”

“Don’t mention it. Everyone here has the resolve to fight the demon lord—our lives are at your disposal. We will charge at your signal.”

Johnnie’s words changed the atmosphere, and we all nodded firmly in response. It was finally time to fight the demon lord. A spike of nervous energy shot through me.

“Gotcha. Actually, though, there are a few things I want to do first.” Makoto turned to Julietta. “Did you bring the thing I asked for?”

“Um, will this work?” Julietta handed him an object made of wood. It was...a mask? The visage of a fox had been carved onto its surface.

“Oh, that looks cool. Thanks.”

“If I’d had more time, I could’ve made something nicer...”

“This is plenty nice. It just needs to cover my face.” He slipped the mask on. “What do you think, Momo? Dia?”

Neither of them waited for more than a second before answering.

“Whoa, it’s so cool!” Momo exclaimed.

“Ah... It’s wonderful, my liege.”

Ehhhh... Honestly, I wasn’t sure what to think. Were their eyes working right? I thought he looked much better without it...

“Yuck,” Lady Estelle said bluntly. “What’s that supposed to be?”

“Ira, you know we’re about to face Bifrons, right? So you also know that I can’t let him see my face. This is me being considerate of *you*.”

“I’m Estelle! And...oh, that makes sense. Carry on, then.”

“Anyway, don’t you think a fox mask is cool?”

“I just told you what I think of it. Besides, people use foxes in harvest rituals to ask for a good crop yield, so they technically fall under my sister Freya’s domain.”

“Oh, I see,” said Makoto. “It’s jealousy.”

Lady Estelle scoffed. “No, it’s not!”

“Don’t kick me. I can see your underwear!”

“If you’re looking, then pay me!”

“That’s ridiculous!”

They’re flirting again... It also wasn’t fair that only *they* seemed to understand what they were talking about. The rest of us had no clue. Even Johnnie looked somewhat taken aback as he joined their conversation.

“So, you just wanted to put the mask on?” Johnnie asked.

“No, that’s not all. We’ve got the chance, so I figured I’d whittle down their numbers some more. It’s nearly time.”

“Elementalist, if you could explain...a little...”

Lady Helemmelk trailed off, and her eyes darted upward. The rest of us followed suit. Suddenly, a chunk of ice the size of a small mountain broke through the mist. We all gasped in shock.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What is that?!” I stuttered.

“*Comet Fall*,” Dia answered. “It’s a spell my liege invented.”

Spell?! This seemed more like a world-ending event!

“It’s massive...” Lady Helemmelk gave a shaky exhale. “I’ve never seen magic like that.”

“Well, that’s no surprise, Mellie,” said Lady Estelle. “*Comet Fall* is a large-scale destruction spell. The Sacred Deities class it as forbidden magic. It’s an inhuman spell that drastically alters the landscape when it’s cast. Makoto Takatsuki, are you okay?”

We all looked aghast at this revelation. Even though we were a good distance away from the castle, the destruction could still reach us.

“Just watch,” Makoto answered smoothly. “This thing is way smaller than the one that fell on Great Keith. And I can control it because of *this*.”

He held up his right hand.

“*Transform*.”

The air immediately grew heavier as mana condensed around us.

C-Can’t breathe...!

His mana felt like an enormous weight sitting on my chest, forcing the air from my body. The pressure was so intense that even some of the warriors from Labyrinthos fell to the ground.

Rapidly, the mana started to coalesce in his hand.

Right Hand of the Elemental.

He spoke, and his whole arm turned transparent and started to glow blue.

“He’s...turning his body into a spirit?” asked Mel.

“An elemental, to be precise,” Lady Estelle replied. “It’s another forbidden technique...but I’ll pretend I didn’t see it.”

The mana seemed to swirl around us, and I felt dizzy, almost drunk on the power. Somehow, I stayed conscious as I watched what was happening in front of us. The massive chunk of ice—he’d called it a comet—slammed into the castle. With a sickening crunch, the whole building cracked like an egg. Then, the comet itself broke apart.

“Aftershocks!” yelled Johnnie. “Brace yourselves!”

We all frantically dropped to the ground.

Makoto laughed softly. “It’s okay. They won’t reach us.” He lifted his glowing arm again.

Water Magic: Go with the Flow.

Immediately, the exploding comet flew high into the sky and burst.

“Wha?”

Everyone simultaneously gasped in shock. Everyone, that is, except Lady Estelle. Even Lady Helemmelk and Johnnie were agape.

The huge explosion covered the sky, and the very air around us seemed to turn red. The noise was so deafening that I thought it might burst my eardrums. Everything went white, then pitch-black. After a moment, I realized that was because I’d closed my eyes. I took a deep breath, then hesitantly opened them.

Huh...

As I looked out upon the scenery, I felt like I was dreaming. The castle had been crushed. An oddly pleasant wind was blowing. And then I saw something even more surreal—the sky was *clear*. This was the first time in my life that I’d ever seen blue skies.

“You used the aftershocks to blow away the *Clouds of Darkness*,” said Lady Estelle. She folded her arms. “Not a bad technique. I think.”

Makoto nodded. “It worked well. How’s the forecast, Ira?”

Since he was wearing the mask, I couldn’t see his expression, but judging by the tone of his voice, he was enjoying himself.

“You make me sound like a meteorologist. Hmm...” Ira thought for a

moment. “The *Clouds of Darkness* have broken apart over a radius of a hundred kilometers. It should take more than half a day for them to return. I almost feel sorry for the demon lord. His town is flooded, his castle crushed by a comet, and sunlight, the bane of his undead, is pouring down while the heroes attack.”

Their conversation went mostly unnoticed, but I heard them. Makoto turned to me.

“Well then, Anna, we’re ready. Let’s go kill a demon lord.”

“R-Right...” I said with a clumsy nod.

This whole event had triggered a cataclysmic shift in my thinking. *Does he even need us? Wouldn’t Makoto be able to do this on his own?*

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

My arm twinged with pain. I used *Calm Mind* to keep my discomfort from showing on my face. *Actually, the mask serves that purpose too.* I didn’t need to worry about revealing just how much I’d pushed myself.

“Hey!” came a scolding voice. A small girl—Estelle, possessed by Ira—was glaring at me. She reached up and smacked my head.

“Ah... What is it?” I asked her.

“You’re pretending to be fine. But you just used up most of your lifespan.”

Anna and Momo—along with everyone else in earshot—reeled in shock.

“Well, elemental magic is huge in scale. It’s not like I’d be able to cast anything in the middle of the battle without hurting our side too. I had to use it now—go big or go home.”

“But there are still limits to—” Ira scoffed. “Whatever. Just rest now.”

I appreciated those huffy words of kindness, but unfortunately, I wasn’t going to be able to take advantage of them. The real show was just about to begin.

“Did the demon lord even survive?”

“I doubt he is uninjured after that attack...”

“Perhaps Sir Makoto’s spell killed him?”

They sure are an optimistic bunch.

“The demon lord is unharmed,” Ira announced, silencing them all.

I nodded. “A little comet isn’t going to do much against Bifrons.”

I’d seen Zagan, and he’d been a monster in every sense of the word. Without Sakurai and his *Hero of Light* skill, we never would’ve won. And from what I’d heard, Bifrons was even more impressive.

“Makoto is right—the true battle will begin now,” Ira declared. “Don’t relax yet.”

Everyone’s expressions grew serious.

Momo tugged at my sleeve. “Um...Sir Makoto, what do I do?”

“You wait here. Mel and the others are staying too, so stick with them.”

“Wait. Should I not be with you?” Mel asked.

“Well, your position means you shouldn’t stand publicly against the demon lords, right?”

“Indeed, but—”

“You’ve helped us more than enough,” I said, cutting off her worries.

From what Ira had told me, Mel—being an ancient dragon—had some relation to the Demon Lord Astaroth. She had thus far taken a neutral position in this war. However, if she fought against Bifrons, it would be tantamount to declaring her allegiance to our side. I felt awkward about trying to insist on that. In the original timeline, she’d taken a stand against Iblis because Cain had killed her family. But now...

Speaking of Cain, his reckless killing had also spurred Hero Abel into action. *He’s a proper war criminal, huh?* Well, though he fought for the demons, he was, above everything else, on *Noah’s* side.

“Sir Makoto, should I direct all of our forces to invade the castle?” Johnnie asked.

Time to reveal the strategy Ira and I came up with. I took a breath and then began to explain.

“The demon army is currently dealing with the flooding. However, there’s no way they could mistake the comet for anything other than an attack. By now, they’ve surely realized that something’s wrong, so they’ll all be heading back to the castle. Johnnie, I need your warriors to make sure they can’t regroup with the demon lord. While you do that, Abe—Anna and the other heroes will be helping defeat the demon lord.”

“Most of the demon lord’s troops are undead,” said Ira. “The clear skies put them in the worst possible position. It’s rather convenient for us.”

Right, the army was cut off from Bifrons *and* weakened. This was the

best strategy we could've come up with.

Johnnie nodded. "Very well. I shall issue the orders to my troops. However, I will accompany you, Sir Makoto. My conscience could not withstand missing the opportunity to repay the core of our oppression with a sword slash."

So Johnnie would be coming with us... Well, he was one of Hero Abel's "true companions," so that was fine. Volf and Julietta would also be accompanying Anna and me. Meanwhile, the warriors from Labyrinthos would be dealing with the army and preventing their return to the castle. If we took any casualties, Mel and Momo would teleport them out. "Estelle" would be by their side.

That was the rough layout of our battle formation.

"Makoto Takatsuki. You're truly planning on going in?" Ira asked. She clearly wasn't happy that I'd be joining the assault on the castle.

"Dia's here, and I can deal with any new mobs that crop up."

"R-Right! I will protect my liege!"

"I won't let the demon lord hurt him!" Anna exclaimed.

Our preliminary preparations were complete. *We should be fine. And more than anything else...*

I wanna see the moment Abel the Savior defeats the demon lord!

"I heard that," Ira scolded, giving me another smack. *Gah, she must've read my mind.* Then, she whispered, "Just...don't die. I can't see your future."

"Pray for our victory," I murmured before turning back to our troops. "Let's go, everyone."

Johnnie and Anna nodded, and the rest of the heroes followed suit.

The battle against the demon lord had begun.



The area around the castle was flooded, so we used flight magic to travel. I couldn't cast it though, so Anna was carrying me.

"Makoto, take care not to fall," she said.

"I won't—you don't need to squeeze so hard."

"I do! *You* should be holding on tighter!"

Guess she's being overprotective.

“The damage looks even worse up close,” Julietta remarked.

“Yeah,” said Volf. “I can’t see any of the army’s monsters.”

They were right—*Comet Fall* had half destroyed the castle and none of the monsters were visible. The first floor was still mostly intact, albeit flooded.

“Where shall we enter?” Anna asked me.

“Let’s use the front door.”

“But that area is flood—.”

Before she could finish, I gave Dia a signal.

“Of course, my liege.” She approached the massive entrance to the castle. As she did, the water parted at her feet.

“Let’s go, Anna.”

“R-Right...”

Johnnie and the other two heroes followed us down. The metal doors were large enough that even a dragon could pass through them. They were also firmly shut. *Now, how do we get inside?*

I didn’t have to ponder long—with a squeal, the doors began to open.

“I suppose that’s as good as any invitation,” Johnnie remarked, walking straight in.

I followed him.

“W-Wait!” Anna protested from behind, trotting to catch up with us. The castle was dark inside, with only sporadic candles illuminating the area. The taps of our footsteps were ominous in the silence.

“Hmm. Considering the power of your comet, this level still looks remarkably intact,” Johnnie murmured.

“Maybe there was a barrier?” I peered around with *Dark Vision*. The place was made of polished marble inlaid with decorations, and I saw no damage visible on the walls or floor.

We progressed carefully through the opulent corridors. Every so often, we came across gargoyles disguised as statues, or animated suits of armor, but Johnnie and the other heroes cut them down without much issue.

We’d assumed that the castle would be swarming with the demon army, but hardly any enemies were present, and not many monsters were still protecting the castle.

We walked to the end of a long corridor, and it opened up into a large hall. At the center of the hall was a raised platform that had steps leading up

to it. Atop that was a throne.

An empty one. No one was sitting in it.

“I don’t see anyone...”

“Don’t let your guard down.”

Warily, we investigated the room.

“Maybe the demon lord wasn’t here?”

“Lady Estelle said he was, but...”

“Then he must be. We should search.”

“He must be,” huh? Ira’d said that, so it had to be good information.

Though, knowing her...

Don’t you trust me?!

Oops, busted. Ira, there’s no one in this throne room. Are you sure Bifrons is here?

Look properly! He’s definitely there today!

I’d resigned myself to thoroughly investigating the creepy-looking hall when suddenly, *something* broke the relative silence of the castle.

“So noisy...”

The voice was by no means loud, but it was clearly audible. We all turned toward it.

The throne was no longer empty. A tall, rather slender man sat upon it, looking down at us with a cold expression.

The air around us grew heavier. I heard someone gulp.

No one asked who he was—we all knew. This was the second time I’d met him. Our first encounter had been in Springrogue at the Demon Lord’s Grave. I had spoken to him a thousand years in the future.

Bifrons, the Undead King.

The demon lord who ruled the continent was sitting on his throne.

“The goddesses’ heroes...”

Bifrons looked almost like a statue. His face was handsome, with idealized features, and it was framed by long, white hair. His skin was tanned and brown, and his eyes glowed dimly red in the gloom of the castle. The stench of death and blood lingered in the air.



Johnnie, Volf, Julietta, and Anna all readied their blades.
Bifrons didn't move.

We had flooded his town and destroyed his castle. And yet, he didn't seem to care. Seeing his reaction made me recall a conversation I'd had with Ira.



Before we left for the castle, the Priestess of Fate gathered everyone together. Of course, Ira was speaking through her. She stood upon a raised platform and looked down at us, hands on her hips.

"We will be moving in to deal with the demon lord shortly. How much do you all know about Bifrons?"

Julietta raised her hand. "He's the king of vampires!"

"That is how he is known, yes. Strictly speaking, though, he is their progenitor. The first vampire. The undead of this world were all created by Bifrons. Hence why he's called 'the Undead King.'"

Really? I didn't know that. The history books I'd read hadn't gone into much detail about this era.

"He must be quite old," someone muttered.

Yeah, as the first undead, he must be pretty long-lived...or, uh long-dead?

"Bifrons is a million years old."

"Wha?!" everyone exclaimed.

"A million years have passed since Bifrons became a demon lord. He is currently the eldest of all the nine demon lords who rule over the planet. Even Astaroth has yet to pass a hundred thousand."

"J-Just because he's lived a long time doesn't mean he'll be str—"

"Demon Lord Bifrons is the most skilled with magic among the nine. This is because the strength of magic is dictated by one's mastery. Any of you mages should understand, no? If you studied for a million years, how high do you think your magic mastery would climb?"

The mages present—including me—sucked in a breath. Compared to the other enemies, Bifrons was going to be on another level.

But, Ira, your explanation only seems focused on how insurmountable a foe he is.

“Any *good* news?” I asked, trying to pull everyone out of the gloomy mood we’d fallen into.

She looked surprised. *Wait, you didn’t notice how you were bringing everyone down?!*

“Ahem, there is, of course, heartening news. The undead are weak to sunlight. Demon lord or not, that remains the same. Challenging him to combat should be done in the daylight. And, we have the Hero of Light!”

Everyone’s gazes gathered on the hero in question. She’d been spending almost all her time in her female form. I hadn’t seen her in “male mode” in ages.

“Bifrons is a powerful demon lord. The Heroes of Ground and Wood could cut him up a thousand times apiece and still only *possibly* defeat him. However, a full-powered strike from the Hero of Light could take him down in one blow!”

That prompted cheers from everyone. *Way to go, Ira—your enthusiasm made everything seem much more positive.*

“However, the Hero of Light’s true power can only be realized in the sunlight. You *must* draw Bifrons out into the sun.”

Ira’s gaze flicked toward me. *Okay, you’re pretty much telling me to destroy his castle...*

“One more thing...though I am unsure whether it could be called *good* news. There is one large difference between Bifrons and the other demon lords.”

“What is it?” I asked.

Ira straightened somewhat haughtily before answering.

“His affability. More so than any of the others, Demon Lord Bifrons is a *gentleman*.”



“My name is Bifrons Goetia, and I am the king to whom this land has been entrusted by his grace. I suppose that will suffice as a greeting? Now, if you would all at least introduce yourselves.”

His tone was gentle, just like Ira had said.

Makoto Takatsuki... You can’t let your guard down just because he’s polite.

I heard Ira's telepathy and mentally nodded. Don't worry—I won't relax around him.

The others seemed to feel the same way. They all wore harsh expressions as they readied their blades.

Bifrons gave a small chuckle. "How lamentable. No response at all. Well, it *has* been quite a while since I last ate a hero of the goddesses. To whom should I address the condolences? I *had* hoped to find out... Well, no matter."

An ominous noise filled the air as a red magic circle began to form behind him. Dense miasma swirled around the throne room.

Ira's intel about him floated to the forefront of my mind. "*His gentleman's persona is nothing but kindness toward livestock. He doesn't kill if he is not eating...and when he is hungry, he eats his fill. That is all.*"

Now that I faced him, I could understand what she'd meant.

"*Rain of Wind Arrows.*"

Johnnie spoke, and hundreds of magic arrows launched toward the demon lord. Bifrons made no attempt to avoid them until suddenly, a black wall appeared in front of him.

Is that...Darkness Barrier Magic?

The black barrier blocked every single one of the hundreds of arrows.

"*Great Dragon Cutter!*"

"*Hurricane Blade!*"

Two heroes slashed around the barrier, closing in on Bifrons. Another barrier did not rise to impede them. An enormous blast shook the ground.

The dust slowly cleared to reveal the demon lord's throne—it had been pulverized. As for the demon lord, his arm was shredded and a wound gaped in his chest.

"Hurra—!"

Before Julietta's cheer had completely left her mouth, the demon lord hummed. In less than a second, his wounds were gone. That wasn't all—even his clothes were pristine again. It was as if the attack had never happened.

The two heroes who had struck him just looked silently on.

Ira quickly spoke up in my mind. *His greatest skill is in Regeneration. Since he is undead, he doesn't even feel the pain.*

She'd told me this before, but seeing it in person was another thing.

Bifrons was on another level. Any direct damage was probably going to be pointless.

“H-Huh...?” mumbled Anna.

Suddenly, I realized what was wrong with the picture in front of me—the throne. Not only was Bifrons completely unscathed, but even the throne he’d been sitting on was now perfectly fine. *But the attacks destroyed it...*

Bifrons let himself fall back onto the throne heavily before nonchalantly answering the unvoiced question.

“This castle is one with my blood. Destroy as much as you will—my palace will revert to its original state. Indeed, the damage from your elemental magic is already repaired.”

Already repaired? The damage from *Comet Fall*? The attack I’d used most of my lifespan to cast?

We couldn’t check that from inside the castle, but it didn’t seem like he was lying. I recalled the unmarred state of the corridors we’d passed through—that must have been due to his regeneration as well.

“On another note, I heard that a ‘terrifying hero’ would be coming to confront me. Now, who would that be?”

We made a concerted effort not to look at Anna, trying to keep as much attention away from her as possible.

That’s right—Annie’s your final attack! Keep her in reserve until then.

I know, Ira, but still...

“Demon Lord Bifrons,” I said. “Why won’t you stand and fight?” Genial or not, surely he would resent us trampling into his home.

“Ah, so you finally speak. Though, would you perhaps consider removing your mask before asking questions?”

“I’m shy, so I can’t speak without the mask,” I insisted.

“And yet, despite your nature, you are rather free with your words.”

“If you’re curious about what’s under my mask, you’re welcome to actually act like a demon lord and take it off yourself.”

“I see. Then I shall take you up on that offer.” A distinct note of humor laced his voice. Maybe he liked the banter? “Now, I believe you asked why I am not fighting. Well, thousands of heroes have stood before me and challenged my power. Unfortunately, not one of them has been capable of inflicting my demise. Compared to those heroes of the past...I predict your strength to be perfectly average. Therefore, I have no need to confront you

directly—my subordinates will be more than capable. I shall simply wait until they return.”

He spoke casually, as if discussing plans to go and get a coffee.

He doesn't see us as a threat in the slightest.

“What the—?”

“Damn you...”

Julietta and Johnnie’s expressions hardened at Bifrons’s words. Well, yeah... He’d said that we were too weak to even bother engaging with. Of course that would piss them off.

“Dia,” I called out, my tone implying that she should show up as dramatically as possible. This was all to draw attention to me and away from Anna.

Dia appeared suddenly at my side—her mana made the very air around us shudder.

Bifrons’s eyes widened slightly in shock. “My... There still lives an elemental capable of controlling an Undyne.”

“Oh, does that pique your interest?” I asked.

“Hmm. Allow me to revise my estimation of your abilities: you are among the upper ranks. It has been quite some time since I have faced an arch elemental—tens of thousands of years at least. The Salamander was quite the opponent.”

He looked rather nostalgic as he spoke. So arch elementals were no match for him either...

“My liege, I do not know whether my strength will be enough.”

Whoa... Even Dia seemed somewhat meek, and *that* was a rarity.

Conversely, the demon lord seemed rather intrigued with me.

“The undead cannot use elemental magic, as it manipulates nature. After all, we are the very antithesis of the natural order. I had assumed that the difficult feat of controlling an arch elemental would be impossible in the span of a human lifetime... Hmm. At first glance, you appear to be a masked boy, but I suppose you must be a masked old man, no?”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m still a teenager.”

Bifrons offered only an intrigued hum; Johnnie and the others let out shocked gasps.

Wait... Haven't I told them how old I am? How old did they think I was?

Bifrons contemplated a moment longer, then exclaimed, “What talent!

Such skill in not even twenty years!”

I sighed. He certainly was excitable.

“So, boy,” Bifrons continued, “what do you say to becoming our tenth? I shall recommend you to his grace personally! We have a spellblade who uses elemental magic as well. I am sure you would have much to discuss with him. Perhaps you know him? He calls himself Cain, and—”

“Don’t fuck with us!” came a rather shocking exclamation from Anna. “Makoto would *never* join the likes of you! And he’d *never* speak with Demon Lord Cain! Enough stupidity!”

The anger in her voice felt like a roaring inferno. I didn’t say a single word.

Well...I’m not going to betray them, so it’s all good.

“I see. Indeed, making this masked boy an undead will remove his elemental abilities, so I would have rather recruited him to our side. A shame.”

He sounded like he honestly *did* think it was a shame.

On another note, Anna *really* hated Demon Lord Cain down to the bone, huh? I definitely couldn’t admit to her that he’d been fun to talk to while we attempted to reach the Seafloor Temple.

I’ll have to make sure we never meet in front of her.

As I was pondering that, Bifrons surveyed Anna with an odd look.

“I hadn’t noticed before...but that avian hero has an odd aura.”

We faltered. Anna looked like she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Her poker face was terrible.

“I see. According to his grace, the Hero of Light was a man, but it seems that the hero is *you*. The Olympians’ trump card, the one to someday be called ‘savior’...”

As he spoke, more and more red magic circles appeared around him. I’d never seen anything like them, so I had no idea what they’d do. His barrier had sprouted from one of them, but having so many around him seemed excessive.

“On your guard,” I warned. The others nodded.

“Allow me to revise my estimation once again.” Bifrons stood up from his throne. “His grace has pierced the veil of time, and according to the insight he gleaned, *you* are the worst possible enemy for me. It would therefore be remiss of me to do anything but my utmost to end you.”

Before I knew what was going on, a huge dark scythe materialized in his hand. He looked like a grim reaper or something.

The scythe's blade sliced through the air.

There were more than ten meters between us, so his strike was, without a doubt, out of range. Still, I still felt uneasy.

"Back!" Johnnie yelled.

"Makoto!" As Anna screamed, she gripped my arm, painfully tight, and yanked.

Something dark passed in front of me an instant later. And a moment after that, I spied strands of my hair floating in the air.

"Wha?"

Stuck in the ground, right where I'd been standing, was a huge blade. If Anna hadn't pulled me back, I would've been cleaved in two.

Bifrons seemed impressed. "Oh...so you dodged that."

What was that? I didn't even see it coming. I certainly can't get in close now.

While we were assessing the situation, the demon lord spoke again.

"That attack combined the mana in my slash with a *Teleport*. Some hero a generation or two back used it as a trump card. Humans think of the most ingenious things. Feel free to do something similar, if you wish."

He's giving us a breakdown of his attack?! Well, if you're that confident...

Johnnie seemed to decide that keeping our distance was pointless—he drew his blade and advanced on the demon lord. "Let us begin."

"I'm with you, Chief!" Julietta exclaimed.

Bifrons tilted his head in acknowledgment. "Impressive swordplay, redheaded elf. And that young woman could be a master in a mere decade. What a shame. It is truly lamentable that turning a hero is impossible." Even in the midst of his idle musings, Bifrons easily deflected their slashes.

"I'll help Johnnie and Julietta buy us time," Anna said as she joined the fray. "You and Volf get our plan moving."

It would have been good to keep her in reserve, but at this point, we didn't have the luxury to do anything but our best. I'd just have to do whatever I could.

"Volf!"

"At your word!"

The two of us started the next spell we had planned. Volf roared, gathering mana in his blade. I wasn't just watching either.

Water elementals, lend me your strength.

They gathered at my call. It would have been quicker to rely on Dia, but *Comet Fall* had used up most of my lifespan, so that route was a last resort.

"Hm? Not using the Undyne, masked boy?"

Despite still fighting with Johnnie and the other two heroes, he still addressed me, disappointment evident in his tone. Julietta's face twitched.

"I like to save my aces," I replied, seeking to stall for some time. "And I could ask the same of you—why aren't you using those red circles?"

Even as I spoke, I continued gathering mana from the water elementals. Those circles were unnerving me. They didn't seem like they had anything to do with the invisible teleporting slash he'd used, so I could only assume that they were for some huge spell. What spell that could be, though, I had no idea.

I doubted he'd tell me, but a hint would be helpful.

"Ah. The spell takes rather a long time to prepare. I will be unveiling it later." He chuckled. "This is the first time I've used it."

So it's not something I've ever seen before.

Despite the sociable tone, Bifrons was still contending with sword slashes and the rain of magic arrows from Johnnie. Julietta was stabbing at high speed; Anna was slashing away at him.

And yet, not a single attack landed. The demon lord was clearly playing with them.

I had no idea why, but every minute, every second, seemed like a lifetime for us.

"Volf," I whispered. "Ready?"

"Ready."

We exchanged glances.

"Scatter!"

Johnnie heard our call and gave the signal to the other two. They quickly followed his instructions.

Bifrons looked at us, clearly interested. "Hmm. So what do you have to show me?"

With an almighty roar, Volf launched a slash at the ceiling.

Water Magic: Comet Fall.

At the same time, I cast my second *Comet Fall* of the day.

I hadn't recruited Dia's help for this one, so it wasn't as impressive, but it didn't need to be—I was only trying to break the top of the castle. My comet combined with Volf's attack would crack the roof and open up a hole to the sky.

Ira's instructions played back in my head. I remembered her gazing over the warriors of Labyrinthos as she spoke.

"Bifrons has spent his years overcoming his weaknesses. Incense, running water, silver, fire, and oil—none of them will have any effect on him. But sunlight is different. As long as he is undead, that is something he cannot overcome. I'm sure you know what you have to do."

So, our plan was to use sunlight.

The first step had been for me to use elemental magic to break apart the *Clouds of Darkness* temporarily. I'd wanted to destroy the castle at the same time, but that hadn't happened. Since Bifrons was inside, we'd need to get him out into the sunlight, which would be a difficult prospect. Opening the ceiling was our best option.

Demon Lord Bifrons, the Undead King, would be bathed in the light of the sun.

The strategy was basic, but we didn't have any other ideas. His subordinates were currently being held back by both the sunlight and the other fighters, so I figured that there shouldn't be any reinforcements.

We had Mel on support leading the ancient dragons, and Momo helping her. We were fine—it was going well.

Right, Ira?

I was a little uneasy at the lack of reply, considering how free she usually was with the telepathy. Well, Mel was protecting her, so she was probably fine.

A massive boom rocked the castle—our combined attacks had pierced through the structure. The ground itself shook as the ceiling collapsed. Dust blocked our vision.

"Makoto! Careful." Anna moved, readying her sword to protect me.

"Wind elementals," I heard Johnnie say, and the dust cleared instantly. Some distance away, I could see Julietta and Volf.

Everyone was safe.

Then, I saw that the heavy miasma of the castle had been blown away.

There was a huge hole in the ceiling.

Julietta's cheer echoed around the room.

I wanted to fist bump as well, but I quickly noticed something wrong. Right now, it was currently the middle of the day. We'd chosen to invade just before the sun was at its apex, and it hadn't even been a whole hour since we'd entered the castle.

So, breaking the ceiling should have allowed sunlight to pour in. And yet, things were far dimmer than I would've expected.

Are the clouds back? Bifrons was skilled with regeneration, so maybe that's what the circles were for! I peered up to check...and I felt my brain stall.

Wha... Ho...w...? What had I gotten wrong?

I heard Anna's dazed voice first. "No...way..."

Through the hole we'd opened up in the ceiling, we could see the sky...and a gorgeous full moon.

The...moon...is out?

Calm Mind lived up to its name and kept me from freaking out, but I still couldn't understand what was going on. When we'd entered the castle, it had definitely been daytime. I'd seen the sun with my own eyes not more than a few dozen minutes ago.

So how was it now nighttime? Was *that* what the circles were for? Was it even possible to turn day into night?

"A beautiful sight, wouldn't you say?"

Bifrons's words had us immediately readying our weapons. He didn't spare us a glance, though—he just flew out through the hole in the ceiling.

"Wait!" Johnnie called, chasing after him. Julietta and Volf quickly followed.

"Makoto! Let's go!" I couldn't use flight magic, so Anna pulled me after them.

Outside, the area was illuminated by dim light from the moon and stars. It was definitely dark. I used *Night Vision* to look around and saw a group closing in on us. For a moment, I thought they were the demon lord's army, but I soon realized that wasn't the case.

"Chief, are you okay?!"

"Sir Volf, what's going on?!"

"Elementalist..."

The warriors, Deckel, and Mel were all there. And all of them looked confused.

“Mel, what happened out here?” I asked.

“I know not,” Mel answered, her usual unflappable nature gone. “The area suddenly grew dark.”

Apparently, even the people out here didn’t know what had happened. The only other person who could explain was...

“Where’s Ira?” I asked.

“Here,” said Mel. “I wanted her to evacuate, but...”

Estelle’s small form was shielded behind Mel. The goddess was truly the only person we had to rely on. Her face was sheet white, though.

“This...this is impossible...”

“Ira?”

Even after I spoke, she just kept staring up, muttering to herself.

This...might be tough...

“Johnnie, let’s retreat,” I said. “Mel, help us ferry everyone out.”

“Makoto?!” Anna exclaimed in shock.

Johnnie looked reluctant. “Sir Makoto...but...”

Mel simply nodded. “Very well.” Apparently, she was the only one with no qualms about fleeing.

It was frustrating to get so close and then retreat, but staying in this situation was not the best idea. We’d just have to regroup.

“I should inform you that there will be no withdrawal,” called a voice from above.

It was Bifrons—he looked down upon us, his white hair and tall frame highlighted against the backdrop of the moon. Out here, his aura felt far more menacing than it had in the castle.

Well, nighttime would make the miasma around Bifrons all the more potent. His intimidating presence caused the fighters from Labyrinthos to start backing off.

“I have summoned my subordinates to welcome you,” said Bifrons. “Wait patiently.”

As he spoke, the moon vanished.

Clouds...?

I thought it might be the *Clouds of Darkness* reforming, but that wasn’t the case. These shapes moved more irregularly than clouds, almost like a

swarm of locusts. It took a while, but I soon realized that the things in the sky were monsters.

“All of them are...monsters?”

“We’re surrounded?!”

“But...”

The fighters sounded like they were in despair. If all of those swarming figures were monsters, then there were thousands, no, *tens of thousands*.

“Calling forth the night took quite a bit of power,” remarked Bifrons, “so I will leave the rest to them—”

Suddenly, Ira interrupted him. “Wait, Demon Lord Bifrons!”

“A priestess? I had thought that Sir Cain killed them all, but I suppose there was a survivor.”

“How... How did you do that?! That magic should take more power than a mortal can wield!”

The demon lord chuckled in response to her anger.

“It is power borrowed from his grace. The rules of this land, dictated by the Olympians’ will, remain as they were in antiquity. My million years of boredom in this world have not been wasted. The barrier between this realm and the divine realm where the gods look down on us with scorn—it will soon cease to be. We have no need for the gods and their bindings.”

“That’s not possible! Even Iblis cannot reverse day and night, that’s m—the Goddess of Fate’s domain!”

The demon lord just smirked meaningfully at her protest. Unlike the teleporting slash, he wasn’t going to reveal his methods this time. But I didn’t care about that right now—Ira’s statement was more important to me.

I bent over to whisper in her ear. “Ira. Ira.”

“M-Makoto Takatsuki?!”

Apparently, she hadn’t noticed me.

“I’m sure you can, right? So go ahead and do it.”

“Huh?” Her eyes widened.

“You can, right?” I asked again.

“I-I can’t!” she protested, shaking her head.

“But you said you could earlier...”

“That was...” she shifted closer to whisper, her voice rough. “If we directly interfere in the conflict here, the wicked deities, the Titanea, and the outer gods will do the same. A fight between the gods would wipe out the

mortals!”

“I...see.” So she couldn’t really act. In other words, the mortals would have to manage something ourselves.

As we spoke, the monsters were getting closer and closer. They’d probably be on us within the minute. We were surrounded by beasts that thought of us as food—everyone seemed to be falling into despair.

Anna was clutching my sleeve tightly.

We don’t have enough time... I’ll just have to buy some.

I looked down at my hand, which was still glowing faintly blue.

Time for the last round.

I let out a short breath.

“Dia, please.”

“Are you sure, my liege? Your life...”

“Just do it.”

“Very well.” Despite the tense look on her face, she held her hands out.

Grand Ice Barrier.

A second later, huge walls and a ceiling, all made of ice, enclosed us. They were several meters thick and made with an Undyne’s mana, so not even the demon lord’s thralls would be able to break through easily.

Still, it was buying time at best. It would hold for...

“We have thirty minutes until it breaks,” Ira announced. She seemed to have regained her composure. And since she could see the future, I knew for sure that this was our time limit.

“Okay,” I said, “so let’s come up with a plan to— Wha?”

My vision suddenly went black. I lost my sense of balance.

“Hu...hhh?”

I realized belatedly that I was looking at the ground. Anna and Momo were holding me up.

“Makoto!”

“Sir Makoto!”

I...passed out...?

Fortunately, it seemed like I’d only been unconscious for a second.

“My liege...” Dia exhaled shakily. “That used all of your life.”

Ira’s eyes were wide. “Makoto Takatsuki, you have no lifespan remaining. You have *days* to live.”

Whew...I used too much.

If I was in the future, Noah would have been reading me the riot act. I felt kind of sad not to be hearing it. However, after a moment, the weight of people's eyes shook me out of that train of thought. Johnnie, Volf, Julietta, and the other warriors gazed at me—Mel and the other ancient dragons as well. Anna and Momo's eyes were teary.

I must have worried them all quite a bit.

"Let's come up with a plan to escape," I said, finishing my earlier thought.

"Are you, okay?" Johnnie asked. His usual neutral expression had been consumed by a worried look.

"Well, I've only got a few days of lifespan left. But we need to figure out how to survive *today* first," I said, trying out a veneer of cheeriness. *Did it work?*

"Johnnie, you lead everyone. Mel, you give the ancient dragons their instructions, then..."

"I'll be with you!" Momo insisted, grabbing onto me. "I'm not leaving you!"

I looked down at her white hair and red eyes. Momo was a vampire. She could slip into the army and manage to escape. She could even teleport. If it came to it, she could flee on her own.

"Sorry, Momo. Would you help me?"

"Of course I will! I'll be with you until we die!"

I took a deep breath. I'd used up all of my lifespan, and I had barely any mana left. For now, I'd have to borrow mana from the water elementals and do whatever I could. Without *Calm Mind*, I was sure I would've already lost hope.

I peered upward. As I did, Johnnie came over.

"It seems we have relied too heavily on you," he said. "I will assist. Anyone who wants to die with us, stay!"

"I'm with you, Chief!"

"We said together to the death!"

Many of the warriors put themselves forward.

This is bad! Johnnie had historically fought Iblis alongside the savior, and he still needed to do that. I couldn't let him die here.

"No! You need to—"

"Sir Makoto," he interrupted. "There are two certainties for a warrior:

we will protect and we will die.”

“Johnnie...”

I could see the surety on his face.

“The town of Labyrinthos...is a good place. The ancient dragons’ assistance means that so many people can live there safely. Even if I fall here, my children will live on. I’ve led us for over a century. I’ve seen so-called heroes appear, challenge the demon lord, and lose, over and over. No, they never even reached the demon lord himself. And yet, we destroyed his castle and crossed blades with Bifrons in person. We may have been a step from victory...but it will make a great tale in the underworld! Isn’t that right, everyone?!”

The warriors all cheered in response to his rallying cry.

Crap... They were full of motivation now, but I wanted them all to run!

“We heroes can’t just escape and leave things to you and Momo,” Volf said.

“So this is where my life ends...” murmured Julietta. “I wish it could have been a little longer.”

“Julietta, you know you can run with Anna.”

“What are you saying?!” Anna exclaimed. “I’ll be fighting to the last too!”

“You’re still young, Anna. Olga entrusted you to us—you shouldn’t force yourself to fight.”

“Don’t even try it! I wouldn’t be a hero if I ran now! I might not be able to use the power of the *Hero of Light*, but I’ll fight as the *Hero of Lightning* until the end!”

“You’ve grown up so much, Annie,” Julietta acceded.

“Right, then there’s no need to say any more.”

Before I knew it, the heroes were bolstered and ready to fight.

No. Seriously. That’s not what I wanted! Anna’s the savior, so she has to survive!

“Everyone seems to have their fighting spirit!” Momo exclaimed.

“Come on, little one. You’re young—you can run.”

“Teacher Mel, shouldn’t *you* escape?”

“We ancient dragons are far stronger than humans. We won’t be defeated so easily.”

“Well, that goes for me too!” Momo insisted. “I’m a vampire, so no

one's going to beat me at night! I'll show you that your training was worth it!"

"My, you sure are talking a big game. Go ahead and show me."

"I will! Just watch!"

Mel and Momo too? What's going on?!

"Makoto Takatsuki...seeing you so close to death seems to have spurred them all on," said Ira.

"Spurred on or not, this is a problem."

The goddess seemed to be the only one who understood how I was feeling.

We're in trouble here, aren't we?

Ten thousand monsters against a thousand of us. And we'd have to fight them in the middle of the night when the undead were strongest.

Just being fired up wasn't going to solve this. *What do I do...?*

Ira put her head in her hands. "No, no no... It's over. I'm never going to hear the end of this."

"Wh-What do we do, my liege?? I want to help, but...how?"

Ira was despairing, and even Dia seemed lost. While we'd been talking, the barrier had begun to crack under the onslaught.

Less than ten minutes left...

We're screwed.

I followed Ira's example, letting my head drop into my hands. Then, suddenly, a screen with words appeared before my eyes.

RPG Player.

This bizarre skill had saved me over and over, and now, it was giving me an option.

I quickly read it.

"Huh?"

I frowned. Then I read it again. Several times.

Could I...do that?

I glanced at Ira next to me. Her head was still in her hands. She hadn't noticed the choice.

Synchro with Ira?

Yes

No

That was the choice *RPG Player* was giving me.

If she reads it, she'll definitely be against it. But honestly, I didn't have time to worry about that. I didn't have any other options.

Guess I'll have to. Not that I'm eager to try it.

I remembered the agony of being burned all over when I tried to *Synchro* with Lucy—my lack of affinity with fire magic had made the ordeal pretty painful. I'd survived back then, but it'd been *damn* close.

I might technically have Fate Magic (Low Rank), but this is a goddess. I can't even imagine what the penalty is going to be.

But...

The noises of the barrier cracking and the monsters around us made the decision for me. It wasn't going to hold much longer.

"Ready!" Johnnie yelled. He was answered by a roar from the warriors.

Volf and Julietta were prepared to fight too. Mel and the other dragons weren't showing any signs of running.

No other choice, then...

Just as I went to grab Ira's hand, words appeared in the air again.

Is *Calm Mind* set to 100%?

Yes

No

I checked—99%. *RPG Player* was being pretty picky. Noah had warned me that using *Calm Mind* at 100% wasn't a good idea, but...I'd have to go with it.

RPG Player, I'm trusting you.

I took a quiet breath and my vision suddenly drained of color. Sounds stopped reaching my ears. I lost all sense of panic, fear, or any other emotion.

With *Calm Mind* fully active, I reached out for Ira's arm again and initiated *Synchro*.

◇ Anna's Perspective ◇

Suddenly, Makoto grabbed the Priestess of Fate's arm.

"Makoto, what are y—"

I couldn't finish the sentence. A chill ran down my spine and I found myself backing away from him.

"S-Sir Makoto?" Momo stammered. She fell to the ground near him.

"M-Makoto Takatsuki?!" the priestess yelped. "What are you doing?!"

He made no reply.

"××××××"

I couldn't hear what he said over the chaos. As I was trying to piece together the words, he suddenly started to glow in rainbow hues.

Wah?

Less than a second passed and then the light vanished. *What in the...?* Before I could even wonder what had actually happened, the situation changed again.

A deafening crack sounded from above. I peered up to see that Bifrons had sliced Makoto's barrier to pieces with his massive scythe.

Monsters—led by the demon lord—poured in through the openings.

"Rather impressive," said Bifrons. "However, it was not enough to stop us. Now then, shall we— Hm?"

The demon lord's easy smile vanished when he saw Makoto.

"What curious mana. No... Is that *ether*? I sensed nothing of the sort earlier." He looked suspiciously at Makoto, then gestured to the horde. "Go after that masked boy."

Hundreds of monsters descended all at once. Makoto just stood there holding Estelle's arm. Johnnie, Volf, and even I could only watch, unable to lend aid.

I tried to yell his name, but I soon realized that...I-I couldn't speak?! And that wasn't all—I couldn't move.

What's going on?!

Panicked, I tried desperately to shift even my fingertips, but it felt like I'd been completely fixed in place. *Wait, no.* My finger was moving slowly, almost like I was pushing through sand.

"Die!"

"Gya gya grah gya!!!"

The fastest of the monsters began their attacks. They were mere steps away from Makoto—their claws and fangs were closing in. Then...

They stopped dead, hanging in the air.

The rest of the attacking monsters froze one by one. It was like they'd all been pinned in the air, just like me. No, just like *us*. Not a single person had cried out at the bizarre sight before us. Johnnie and Volf couldn't even move their mouths. Before I knew it, the tumult was silent, as if it had never been there.

"M-Makoto Takatsuki... Stop. Let go. If you..."

The priestess was the only one near him who could talk normally.

"What a surprise... Are you not an elementalist?" Bifrons asked. The rest of the monsters were warily hanging back. "Time Barrier Magic... The closer something is to you, the slower time progresses for it. That spell was rare even in the past. I believe this is the first time I've ever seen it."

Slowly, Bifrons swung his huge scythe. "It has a weakness, though."

A brief instant later, the slash passed through Makoto's chest.

The attack teleported?! Right, crap! The demon lord has the ability to ignore any distance between him and his opponent!

Makoto!

"Makoto Takatsuki?!"

I couldn't voice my scream, but my mental yell overlapped with the priestess's shout.

"Guk..."

Bright red blood burst from Makoto's lips.

No...you can't!!!

Move! I need to move! If I don't...

"Well, that was rather anticlimactic," Bifrons said. "My weapon is cursed with death. Taking its blade through the heart will kill without fail—this is the end for you. I suppose I should at least see your face before you expire."

As he spoke, Makoto's mask broke apart and fell away. The slash must have sliced through the mask as well as Makoto's chest. His expressionless face was revealed.

"An average human. I had thought there might be *some* secret beneath the mask. Well then, I will just take your head and end—"

"Finally managed the *Synchro*," Makoto said.

Huh?

The tone of his voice was the one he always used when talking to me.

Despite the gaping wound in his chest, he was acting the same as ever.

He was okay! But...for some reason, there was a stirring in my heart.

It was just his usual calm voice.

Bifrons stared at Makoto. “So you can still speak... You are an oddly hardy human.”

“Hm? Oh, you mean this?” Makoto asked, pointing at the hole in his chest.

It was painful to even look at—a huge gash ran through his upper torso.

“Nothing living can remain alive after a slice from my scythe of death,” said Bifrons.

Even after hearing that, Makoto remained unbothered.

“It’s okay. I stopped time on the injury. I won’t die,” he said absently, wiping the blood from around his mouth. It was like he was just discussing the weather.

“Foolishness.” Bifrons smirked. “However much you slow time around it, you cannot be saved from that wound.”

Though the demon lord seemed amused, the pervading sense of ease was gone from his expression. Not surprising, considering how Makoto was acting. Regardless of his apparent impending doom, Makoto was just calmly looking around the area.

Then, his eyes met mine. I felt my breath hitch.

His gaze seemed to pass through me like I wasn’t even there. Looking into the depth of his eyes, I saw...me. Standing there, my body glowed in a rainbow of light.

“You reversed day and night on the continent. That’s an impressive spell, Demon Lord Bifrons,” Makoto remarked, an easy cadence to his voice.

This was weird. Bifrons’s spell had essentially prescribed our deaths, and yet, there was no sign of that tension in Makoto’s voice.

I was more scared of Makoto right now than the demon lord.

“It is a miracle granted to me through his grace,” the demon lord eventually replied. “It is not something I can use with impunity. But...how are you talking? Why are you not dead? Are you really human?”

The demon lord’s gaze was aghast, like he was looking at a horrifying sight. Well, Makoto was talking normally, even though his chest was split open by a gaping wound that was certainly fatal.

“I stopped time. I said that already, didn’t I?”

The demon lord’s eyes widened. “Impossible. You *stopped* time? A complete cessation of chronological progress is...impossible...”

“Okay then.”

Slowly, Makoto lifted his hand and spoke.

Time elementals.

“Ahhhhh! No, that breaks decree one thousand and twenty-one of the div—”

Estelle’s yell was cut off by a soft smile from Makoto.

“You can see the same future as me, right? So you won’t shake my hand off.”

“Right! You’re right! But still!”

The demon lord seemed lost and unable to follow the conversation between them. “What are you two...?”

I was lost too. I couldn’t understand what was going on with them at all.

“Time elementals, correct the space-time distortion,” Makoto said, pointing to the western sky.

What is he trying to do?

Suddenly...

“What the?!” yelled Bifrons.

I could see the sun.

The night sky was gradually lightening. As I was bathed in sunlight, I felt strength filling my body. Finally, I managed to speak.

“Ma...koto!”

He turned to me. “Ah, that makes sense, Anna. The time barrier isn’t enough to stop you from moving.”

“W-We need to get that wound healed first...” I pleaded.

There was still a huge slash through his chest. He ignored my statement, though.

In the distance, the sun was rising faster and faster. Shrieks filled the air. The demon lord’s followers were undead, and the cacophony was coming from his horde. The sun was like poison to them—undead couldn’t persist in the daylight.

“Stop it!” Bifrons yelled. He leveled his scythe at Makoto and slashed.

Makoto’s raised arm went flying, severed from his body.

I screamed. “Makoto!”

I didn't know how many times I'd cried out, but Makoto's expression didn't even flicker.

"Unfortunately for you, I asked the time elementals to turn on the daylight. Cut me as much as you like—it's pointless. If anything, hurting their elementalists is just spurring them on."

Makoto's tone was completely unconcerned even though his arm was missing and he had a massive hole in his chest.

I stared at him, but I couldn't muster a single word.

"You're mad," Bifrons growled. Fear clouded his expression.

"Makoto Takatsuki!" Estelle yelled. "You can't keep this up without ruining your mind and body!"

"Right... I'm...just about...at my limit..."

His voice suddenly started to weaken. The sun had just reached its zenith above us.

"Well, it's done now. I'll let the *Synchro* go."

Makoto released Estelle's arm. The moment he did, blood gushed from his stump.

He collapsed to the ground.

"S-Sir Makoto!"

"Makoto!"

Momo got to him quicker than I could. Her face was covered with tears.

"Momo..." Makoto wheezed. "The sunlight...is bad for you..."

Astonishingly enough, he seemed more concerned for her than himself.

"Sir Makoto! No... Don't die. Please, don't die!"

She was weeping at his side. Makoto's lifeless eyes turned toward me, and I felt myself shudder.

"Ma...ko...to...?"

"Anna...the rest...is...up to you."

Makoto's eyelids fell, and he said no more.

"Teacheeeeeerrrr!"

Momo's scream filled the air.

B-But...

"*Healing Magic: Revival!*"

Estelle was at Makoto's side, and she immediately cast healing magic on him. The bleeding stopped. Gradually, his wound closed.

"It's okay! He's still alive!" Estelle exclaimed. "Leave him with me and

carry out your own duties!”

Her words brought me back to myself. Makoto’s request for me to defeat the demon lord replayed in my mind.

Shining sunlight poured down on me.

I need to finish this... I can’t waste the opportunity that Makoto almost killed himself for.

Peering around, I took in the scope of the situation. I needed to ensure that I knew where everything was. Our enemies—including the demon lord—had started to retreat.

It’s their fault!

My sword shone prismatically—I tightened my grip.

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Receives a Revelation

My eyes slowly opened.

Above me was a dimly lit ceiling. My body felt heavy, and I couldn't really remember what had happened. I'd been fighting...we'd been in trouble, and...

"So you're awake, Makoto Takatsuki."

Someone called my name. I looked in the direction of the voice and saw a short girl with gray hair. That was the Priestess of Fate, which meant...

"Ira?"

"No, I'm Estelle right now."

"Estelle?"

I peered closely at her face. Ira was always in the driver's seat, so I'd never talked directly with Estelle.

"Now that I think about it, we haven't spoken before," she said. "I thank you for your efforts in fighting the demon lord."

I flinched. Quickly, I tried to sit up. My body felt awfully heavy, though.

"Guh!"

"No. Stop trying to rush," Estelle commanded. "You were stabbed and he cut off your arm."

The memories were flooding back to me now. We'd gone to fight Bifrons. We'd picked the best time of day possible, but his spell had caused us some issues. Then...

Right, I did get a scythe through the heart. My arm was cut off too.

When I checked, I could feel my heart beating, and I had both arms. I breathed a sigh of relief. More questions started to bubble up in my mind.

"What happened after I passed out?" I asked her. "Where are we? Also, where is Ira?"

Estelle smiled at my rapid-fire questions. Her expression was rather soft. She really did act differently than Ira.

“I’ll answer those one at a time. First, thanks to your efforts and the return of the sunlight, Demon Lord Bifrons was defeated by the Hero of Light—just as history originally dictated. Your achievements have also granted you a hundred years of lifespan, so rest assured.”

I slowly turned the words over in my head. It took a moment to understand what she meant. The demon lord...was dead?

“I...see...”

I let out a deep sigh. We’d managed to accomplish our divine duty... Whew.

Though, I do wish I’d seen it...

I’d heard the story of the legendary savior defeating the demon lord over and over in the Water Temple. It was a shame I hadn’t gotten to witness it for myself. That would have made a good story to tell to Lucy and Sasa.

“You seem to be rather easygoing about all of this,” Estelle remarked. She sighed in exasperation. “Did you not realize? It’s been three days since you nearly died.”

“Three days?!”

It’d been that long? Well, at least that explained why I felt so lethargic.

“As for your next question—we are in the town of Labyrinthos. The ancient dragons led by Lady Helemmelk brought everyone back. The citizens are in the middle of celebrating the demon lord’s death.”

“Huh...”

Now that she mentioned it, I realized I could hear noise in the distance.

What...? Everyone was in the middle of a party while I’d been passed out? I felt kinda sad about that, but it would have been weirder if there *wasn’t* some sort of satisfaction. *Maybe I should go have a look-see.*

“As for your third question, the Goddess Ira is—”

There was a sudden crash, and I heard something break.

“S-Sir Makoto?”

“Makoto?”

Momo and Anna were standing in the doorway. It seemed like they’d gone to fetch some water. The crash had been the sound of shattering cups.

So the two of them have been looking after me.

“Anna, Momo, I’m sorry for wo—”

“Aah!”

“Makoto! I’m so glad you’re awake!”

They leaped at me before I could finish apologizing.

I still felt extremely weak, even more than usual, so an extra two people's worth of body weight was intense. Still, I couldn't really complain—I could tell from their expressions that they'd been worried the whole time I was asleep.

Still, being held by two attractive people made it rather difficult to relax. Both of their faces were so close...

I just decided to wait it out and let them hold on to me until they calmed down.

Anna let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, Makoto. I lost control. I'll go get Lady Helemmelk and Johnnie. Everyone's been worried."

With that, Anna left the room. Momo was still latched on to me.

"I'm so happy," she said tearily. "You're alive..."

I stroked her hair.

Estelle gazed at us. "Makoto Takatsuki, we can always continue this later."

"No need," I replied. "What happened after I passed out?"

I wanted the details. However, before the conversation could go any further...

"Makoto!"

"Elementalist!"

"Sir Makoto!"

The locals were piling into the room one after another. Johnnie and Mel were there too.

"Everyone was worried," Estelle insisted with a smile. "You should speak with them."

I wasn't steady on my feet, but I managed to follow them out. *It'll count as physio, I guess.*

As I stepped outside, a cheer sprung up all around me.

"The hero awakens!"

"Savior!"

"Vanquisher of the demon lord!"

Uh, no, that wasn't me...

I looked around and saw Anna smiling at me. I wasn't even *technically* the hero here. It felt like I was cheating...but that was *probably* fine?

"You were instrumental in the battle," Estelle whispered into my ear.

“Everyone in the town feels that way.”

She must’ve read my mind.

“I just did what I could, though.”

“And yet your actions saved all of us.”

Apparently, everyone here was far more grateful than I thought.

People gathered gradually around me. I mentioned feeling kinda hungry since it’d been three days since I’d last eaten. Before long, what was essentially a mountain of food was piled in front of me.

Food was a precious resource for us...and they were even letting the alcohol flow free. By the time I had even started to process everything, I’d become the center of the party.

People were asking about the *Fate Magic* spell I’d used against the demon lord.

Well, it’s not like I can tell them that I used Synchro with Ira. They’d think I was nuts. Instead, I just talked around it. I knew that staying in one place would just get me bombarded with questions, so I circulated and talked to the others. The first person I came across was Johnnie, the chief of the town. He was surrounded by beautiful women of various races.

“Sir Makoto! The girls of the town are all crazy about you. You can have whichever of them you like as your bride.”

I laughed awkwardly.

For once, he was being rather talkative, and I couldn’t quite tell whether he was joking or being serious—hence why I laughed off his comment.

I found Mel next.

“Elementalist! What a man you are! I’ve never seen such excitement in all my years!”

“It’s an honor to hear it.”

She was eating with the other ancient dragons, and I could tell that she was also rather excited.

“You guys need to be more like him!” she told the other dragons at her table.

“Don’t ask for so much, mother...”

“That was divine rank magic...” another complained.

Maybe Mel was tipsy too.

The third stop on my tour of the party was the gathering of heroes. Momo was with them as well.

“Thanks to you, Sir Makoto, we fulfilled the promise we made to our comrade,” said Volf.

“I wish we could have celebrated it with her...” Julietta murmured.

The two of them seemed rather downtrodden.

“None of that, you two! We’re celebrating,” Anna said brightly.

This whole situation was the exact opposite of when we’d first met—Volf and Julietta were now glum, while Anna offered optimism.

Momo let out a gusty sigh. “I still can’t believe it,” she said, sitting dazedly on her chair.

All her energy seemed to have vanished now that I’d woken up—it’d been replaced by relief.

I felt bad, so I sat down next to her.

“Makoto,” Anna whispered into my ear. “I want to speak with you later when you’ve got some time...”

“Sure.”

The look on her face was meaningful but otherwise utterly unreadable. *I wonder what she wants to talk about. Maybe she wants to thank me for my help.*

Now that I was finished visiting everyone, I felt kind of tired, so I stood up. The party around me was still in full swing.

I activated my *Stealth* skill and moved away. The lake was quieter than the festivities, so I slowly made my way toward the shore. When I got close, I heard a splash and a scream.

Huh? Someone fell in? Maybe they’d slipped thanks to all the alcohol. I turned to call for someone, but everyone was busy with the party. Not really a problem—I can save a drowning person.

I rushed over toward the lake, which was dark enough that I couldn’t really see.

“Dia,” I called out.

She appeared beside me instantly with a smile on her face. “Yes, my liege? I’m glad to see you awake again.”

“Someone fell in the lake! Find them quickly.”

“Of course!” she chirped before suddenly rocking back in confusion.

“Huh? I can’t see anyone.”

Dia should be able to identify what’s going on in the whole lake at once. But I’m sure I heard something fall...

That was when someone came staggering into the area.

“Hrmm... I drank too muuuuch,” the elf sing-songed. If I was remembering right, this was Johnnie’s daughter. She looked like Lucy, and her behavior was similar too—Lucy often insisted on drinking a lot even though she couldn’t hold her booze.

I was a little worried about the girl, so I moved closer to speak to her. Suddenly, she slipped and yelped.

“*Water Magic: Walk on Water!*”

I cast my spell immediately, stopping her from falling into the lake. Once she was stable, I asked, “Are you okay?”

“Wha? H-Huh...Sir Makoto? Ah, this is so embarrassing...”

“You need to be careful around here.” I turned, shifting to go and investigate the rest of the lake. But I didn’t make it far.

“Sir Makoto...” she murmured, pressing herself—mainly her chest—into me. “Um...I’m a little tipsy... Would you take me back to my room?”

“Uh...”

Her large eyes peered up at me, and it felt like I was looking straight at Lucy. The suggestive sight seemed to affect me more than it usually did. *Maybe I’m homesick...* If Noah were around, she’d be ranting about how I shouldn’t turn down an invitation like this.

“Am I...not your type?” asked the girl.

I couldn’t stand being looked at like that. A denial slipped past my lips, and she blushed happily.

“Then, if you’ll come this way,” she said, tugging my arm.

“Makotooo.”

“Sir Makotooo.”

Anna and Momo were suddenly right next to me.

“O-Oh. Hero, Lady Momo. I-I was just...”

“She nearly slipped into the lake since she’s had a bit too much to drink. I was going to take her to her room,” I explained, making sure none of it was technically a lie.

“I’ll take her,” Anna said.

“Ah, I was going to go with Sir Ma—”

“No! He’s tired!”

And with that, they were gone.

“You go along with things rather easily, don’t you?” Momo asked with a

side-eyed glare.

She must have overheard the conversation.

“There’s a bigger problem,” I said, changing the topic. “I think someone fell in the lake.”

“What?! That’s awful.”

I told her about the splash I’d heard, and as I was doing so, Dia appeared again.

“My liege, I searched the entire lake. There is no one there. I am sure of it.”

“Right. Thanks, Dia.”

No one had fallen in. So, what had I heard?

There was only one explanation I could think of; the elf girl *would* have fallen into the lake.

So... Fate Magic...Future Sight...

I’d heard about this from Furiae. She had talked about *Future Sight* activating without her trying to use it. But my *Fate Magic* was only low rank, so I shouldn’t have been able to use that spell at all.

What had happened?

“Um...Sir Makoto?”

“Momo,” I turned to her. “I’m tired now, so I’m going to rest in the room.”

“I’ll join you!”

The two of us headed back to our room. It had been so long since we’d been here. I intended to sleep on the floor like before, but Momo wouldn’t hear of it. Since I’d only just recovered, she insisted on me using the bed. I couldn’t make a girl sleep on the floor, though.

It was less of a bother to just share the small bed. Though it was a bit cramped, I soon fell asleep.



I woke up.

No...I’m not awake. I’m...dreaming.

It wasn’t an ordinary dream, though. This also wasn’t Noah’s space. It was somewhere unfamiliar, an area where an expensive-looking carpet seemed to stretch out forever. Bizarrely, there were doors and bookshelves

scattered around the area.

Loads of books littered the floor. It was far from what you'd call a "tidy" area.

Still, these things weren't what most drew my attention—that honor went to the cute stuffed animals. There were bears, rabbits, cats, dogs, and so on, all moving and busily working. It was almost like they were alive.

I was watching them carry on vacantly when a white rabbit came over to me. It bowed, then gestured like it wanted me to follow. I considered for a moment but then decided to go along after it.

We passed by other plushies working away until finally, we stopped. Our destination was a fancy-looking desk and chair that must have belonged to this area's ruler.

Sprawled out across this desk was a short girl.

She was breathing softly. Mountains of little bottles were scattered around her feet. I picked one up and peered at it. The label read "Yunker."

So these were from Earth...and she'd drunk way too many. It made her look like a worker who'd been crunching overtime for ages.

The rabbit that had shown me here was gone, so with nothing else to do, I spoke to the sleeping girl.

"Um...Ira?"

She shot up suddenly, her eyes darting around the area. "Hwah?! No! I wasn't sleeping! Don't tell my sist— Oh, Makoto Takatsuki?" Once she saw my face, her expression calmed down. "S-So you're finally here. You did well in the fight against the demon lord. I called you here to talk."

She crossed her dainty legs, then floated up into the air to look down at me. Well, I *was* in front of a goddess, so I figured I should at least drop to one knee and bow my head.

I did need to talk, but first, there was something else I was concerned about.

Should I mention the trail of drool on her face?

"Forget the drool," she snapped, wiping her face as her cheeks reddened.

Oh, right, she could read my mind—trying to be polite about it was pointless.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I asked, remaining on one knee. I lifted my head and saw that her slender legs were right in front of me. Considering the angle, I should've been able to see right up her skirt, but

unfortunately, her divine techniques meant I couldn't. Apparently, she used the same power that Noah did.

"Where are you looking?!" she demanded. Her cheeks were cherry red now as she tugged her skirt down.

"Well, you were floating in the air, so the opportunity was right in front of me." I'd thought she was doing it on purpose.

"I wouldn't do that! Wait, I'll make us somewhere to sit!"

She snapped her fingers. A massive thud shook the ground, and an enormous bed with a canopy fell from the sky.

"Whoa!" *A-Amazing...*

She sat on the bed and then patted the area next to her. "Come on, sit down!"

"Um..."

Was she doing this on purpose? Did she want me to sit next to her on the bed?

You know that if you ask for that, you'll give a guy the wrong idea...

"What?!" exclaimed Ira. "Are you planning to make a move on me? If you try it, *they'll* deal with you."

"They?"

I looked up and saw a group of stuffed animals holding a huge pair of scissors. Their blank eyes were fixed on me.

S-Scary...

I wouldn't have had the courage to try and make a move anyway, but I immediately sat down and made sure there was plenty of distance between Ira and me.

"Now then, Makoto Takatsuki." she said with a smile that gave me chills. Her crystalline eyes peered at me. Now that I was seeing her up close, I couldn't deny that Ira was inhumanly beautiful.

"Y-Yes, Ira?" I stammered.

"Well done defeating the demon lord."

"There were a bunch of surprises..." I pointed out.

She gave a long pause, and a sour look passed over her face. "There were."

"You can see the future, can't you? Did you not see it coming?" If we'd known about Bifrons's trick ahead of time, we could have come up with another plan.

“I-I’m sorry. But...that *thing* he used was strange. He shouldn’t have been capable of such a feat. Someone else is manipulating things behind the scenes.”

“A Daemon?” I asked. Iblis was apparently Typhon’s apostle, so it would make sense for him to borrow power to then lend to his subordinates.

“The Daemons don’t tend to play the long game using time manipulation to trap their opponents. They’re far more likely to just obliterate everything. This isn’t like them... It could be some other divinity.” Ira put a hand to her chin and trailed off into mutters for a moment. Then, she spoke up again. “When the day and night reversal happened, I checked thousands of futures. In every one of them, I could see the Hero of Light falling. I thought it was over...”

“It’s a good thing I used *Synchro* with you, then.”

“You just...” She held her head in her hands before continuing. “Do you know how dangerous that was? People like Estelle who can withstand being a goddess’s avatar are one in several million. An untrained human would lose their mind instantly if they tried it. That is partly why I brought you here today...”

Huh. Losing my mind didn’t sound like fun at all. “What do you mean?”

“The difference between a weak mortal and an immortal divinity with an eternal body is too extreme. *Your* body and sanity must have been affected, so I’m going to check.”

Without further ado, she started patting me down.

“Wh— Hey! That tickles,” I protested.

“Deal with it.”

Sh-She’s just... I’d mentioned it several times, but Ira was really beautiful. She was also right on top of me, touching me. *Calm Mind. Calm Mind...*

“Oh...?” She frowned.

“What is it?”

“This is strange. I can’t see anything different about you. Have you felt unwell or anything? Maybe you’ve lost some memories?”

“Hmm...”

I’d felt sluggish at first since I’d slept for three days, but other than that, nothing. My memories were all clear as well.

But then, I remembered something.

“Oh, actually...” I proceeded to explain how I’d “heard the future” near the lake in Labyrinthos.

“What? The future? The low rank version of *Fate Magic* I gave you shouldn’t let you do that.”

“Exactly. It was weird.”

“Hmm. You don’t have more mana than you did before, and your skills are just the same...” She trailed off there, pausing for a long time. Then, her eyes went wide. “Wha?”

“What is it, Ira?”

“You have...*anima*. Why? Wait, is this *mine*? No way, how...?” She didn’t answer my question, just inspected me with a harsh expression. “Here!” she exclaimed, suddenly grabbing my arm and hauling my sleeve up.

“Ow!”

There was a glowing blue crest on my arm. I’d gotten it in Great Keith when the comet had been falling.

“That’s...”

“The crest Noah drew?” Ira finished.

I nodded. “It is.”

When I’d failed to change my arm into an elemental, my magic had gone berserk. Noah had given me that crest to stop it from happening again.

“I know what you did in Great Keith. I am also aware of how Eir helped Noah temporarily manifest to stop her believer—you. But...this crest is multilayered. It’s also really well hidden.”

“Ira...what does it do?” I asked uneasily. Noah was always plotting away, but this was some weird spell she’d put on me.

Ira spoke slowly. “To assist...in using *Synchro* with the Goddess of Fate.”

Her words echoed in my head. It was to help *Synchro* with *her*... In other words, exactly what I’d just done. I’d thought I had managed to do it on my own, but apparently, my goddess had helped.

“Well, that’s Noah for you,” I said happily. The crest had been a literal lifesaver.

“What are you talking about?! It’s impossible! The whole thing was a sequence of anomalies! No one could have foreseen it.”

“Maybe Noah just thought it sounded like something I’d do.”

I'd spent a lot of time with my goddess, so it seemed fairly likely that she'd be able to guess what I'd do and help me out.

"Sure, experiencing how you act in real time—that seems possible. But then why hide this power in the crest? Did she somehow see what would happen today? That's not..."

Ira once again trailed off into incoherent mumbling. Only one feeling filled my heart.

"Noah...thank you." I wasn't her believer right now, but I still held the dagger in front of my chest and offered her a prayer.

"This is *my* temple, and you're praying to another goddess?"

"Ah... Sorry."

Ira sighed. "Well, whatever. I don't *like* relying on her for help, but we dealt with the demon lord using that *Synchro*. In terms of results, everything went well. Now, we need to discuss our next plans."

"Right, Ira." I straightened.

"Bad news first. I've been forbidden from descending to my priestess."

"Oh..."

I'd been surprised that *Estelle* had been there when I'd awoken. Apparently, that was because Ira herself was now forbidden from coming down here.

"That's...my fault, isn't it?" I asked.

"The time magic you cast...was against divine law," she said, her tone surprisingly light. "A mortal should've never been allowed to cast it. This is the penalty for that."

"Sorry," I apologized again.

"Don't worry about it. The alternative would have meant me missing chances to manipulate time...and that could have led to the Hero of Light's death. And as far as punishments go, this one is mild—I could've lost my title instead. Being stuck up here is nothing compared to having to start over as an apprentice."

That was a surprise. So she wasn't that angry about losing her ability to descend to the mortal realm. However, she could have lost her rank as a goddess? Things were complicated no matter what world you were in, apparently.

"Besides, I gave you that communication necklace," said Ira. "We can continue to talk through that, just as we have so far."

I nodded. “Got it.”

“Okay, next.” She folded her arms and looked at me meaningfully.

“What is it?” I asked.

She seemed to hesitate. *More bad news.*

“That...depends on how you take it. It is related to you, though.” I straightened again, waiting for her to continue. “Hero Abel— No, Saint Anna, I suppose...has fallen for you.”

It took me a few moments to respond, and even then it was with a flat “What?”

Did Ira really want to talk *romance*? No, this conversation had to be about something more important. I waited to see what she’d say next.

“In the original timeline, Hero Abel’s awakening was due to the Hero of Fire’s death. Just before Olga died while fighting Bifrons, she told him to live and be strong, and that she was proud of him. That was what made him awaken as the Hero of Light”

“I...know that.”

This was a famous legend, but right now...

“However, in this timeline, the Hero of Fire was cut down by Cain before she could give him those words. Thus, the opportunity for Abel’s awakening was lost. Recently, though, he has awoken to that strength. Do you know why?”

“Well...”

I knew what she wanted to say.

“I am sure you have already realized, but *you* are the hero’s emotional support now.”

I couldn’t really deny it. It was an honor, but this was the savior of the world we were talking about...

“And,” Ira continued, “Anna said she wanted to talk to you later, didn’t she?”

“She did... But how do you know?”

“I saw her future. I won’t give you specifics, but you should respond to her feelings as best as you can.”

“What do you even mean best as—”

Ira cut me off. “She’s going to confess to you.”

“Wha?” *I thought you weren’t supposed to say that kind of thing out loud?!* “Ira...”

“What’s with that look? It’s far better for you to know in advance than for the information to come out of left field. All right, make sure you don’t reject her.”

I couldn’t hide my unease. “B-But I...”

“I know. You have partners waiting for you in the future, and you won’t stay in this era. It doesn’t need to be *true*...but do answer her feelings. At least until the Great Demon Lord is defeated.”

I fell silent.

The entire reason I was here in the past was to save the world. I didn’t have the luxury of being picky with my methods...but could I trick Anna like that? Was that something that could even be allowed within a party? I would be playing with her heart...

“Makoto Takatsuki.” She looked seriously at me, taking my hands in her much smaller pair. “I understand your discomfort...but only *you* can do this.”

“That’s not fair.” I sighed, then started to plan. How to be as honest as possible—how to avoid hurting her.

“Thank you,” she said in relief.

I had to admit though, Ira was serious. *Noah or Eir would be egging me on—they’d be calling me a lucky bastard right about now for having someone like Anna fall for me.*

As soon as I thought that, Ira made a strangled noise. She had an odd look on her face. “I suppose I might be too serious. My sisters were always telling me to relax, even before I became a goddess...”

“Did you hear it that often...?”

That was pretty much how she’d acted while she’d been staying with us mortals. Though Ira was flighty, she was also reliable.

“Hey! Don’t say that! I’m doing my best.”

“I *do* rely on you, don’t I? So, what’s next?”

We’d gotten a bit off-topic, so I pulled us back. There was still lots to do before we could defeat the Great Demon Lord himself, and I’d never even seen hide nor hair of him.

There was silence.

“Ira?”

She didn’t immediately answer—just looked away. She had something on her mind to talk about...but was it really *that* difficult to say? I really

didn't want to deal with anything heavier than the conversation about Anna...

"Um... Will you hear me out, even after my mistake with Bifrons?" she asked, looking up at me.

"I will. About anything."

"Really?"

Her face broke into a smile. That was just unfairly cute. Her cuteness...no, it was her *reliability* that made me somehow trust her. After all, we'd defeated the demon lord thanks to Ira's advice. I wanted to work with her to overcome the situation here in the past.

I didn't say any of this aloud, but that's what I'd decided in my heart.

Ira seemed to make up her mind—she opened her mouth to speak.

"Makoto Takatsuki... Will you go and defeat Iblis?"

That...was the last thing I expected her to say.

"Defeat Iblis?" I asked. "But we struggled enough with just a demon lord..."

When I'd first arrived in the past, I'd been prepared to set my sights on Iblis as soon as I had the party together. Indeed, I'd been desperate to finish my mission and search for a method to return to my present.

But now...I honestly wasn't so confident. Bifrons had been a truly horrifying opponent, and Iblis had *nine* other demon lords as his retainers. As things currently stood, I doubted we could win.

Ira must have read my mind because she offered me a soft smile. "I understand how you feel. However, what you're thinking isn't the case right now. Things are as good as they could be."

"I don't get what—"

Before I could finish off with "you mean," Ira put her hand on my cheek. Her skin was warm against mine.

Fate Miracle: Resonance.

I heard a beautiful voice, and Ira's body—and mine—started to glow in all colors of the rainbow. What was this?

"Only those with anima can react to that spell," she explained. "In other words, you currently possess the power of the gods."

"What?!"

I had *anima*?! I hadn't realized that at all.

"I told you. Using *Synchro* with a goddess would normally make you

lose your sanity. It should've put you in a vegetative state, and at the very least, it would have interfered with your mind and body. And yet, you have shown no sign of that."

"Because of Noah's crest, right?"

"Indeed. And along with her miracle comes the side effect of possessing anima."

"Is that...going to cause a problem?" The whole "vegetative state" thing didn't sound good in any way, shape, or form.

Ira shook her head. "No. You'll be fine. I hate to admit it, but it's just what I'd expect from her skill. The anima is contained to prevent any negative influence on you."

I gave a mental hum. So Noah had thought of that too...

"All right," I said. "So I get that I have anima. Will that be enough to help us defeat Iblis?"

"Anima" sounded strong as a concept, but I doubted I was like Sakurai or Anna.

Ira let out an exasperated sigh and then shook her head. "Think of it this way—having anima means you have infinite life and an invulnerable body."

Infinite and invulnerable. It certainly *sounded* impressive, but...

"I don't quite get it."

"It's like you've got that *Super Star* skill your friend has, except it's constantly active. As things stand, you'd make a good match for Alec, the Hero of the Sun."

I gawked at her. "But that's ridiculous!" Sasa had used her skill to knock out the Hero of Incandescence in a single hit. And Alexander had blasted away Sakurai, the Hero of Light.

I had *that* kind of power?!

"I'm not surprised that you can't believe it. You can't even feel the anima." Ira frowned, then started muttering again. "Why would Noah do this? To hide it from us and the Daemons, maybe? But then, surely no one would have realized... So did she make sure that *I* would notice? That's impossible."

I used half an ear to listen to her as I looked at my hands. I certainly didn't *feel* strong—especially not *ridiculously* strong. Curious, I quickly whipped out my Soul Book.

Wh-What the?!

All of my stats just said “Unknown.”

“A Soul Book is used to measure a mortal’s power. It can’t calculate anything with anima,” Ira explained.

R-Right... So my body really *had* changed.

“In that case...”

Could I truly defeat Iblis now? Thank you, Noah!

“There are things you need to be aware of, of course,” Ira said, pulling me back down to reality. “You won’t remain like this forever. A human having anima is an anomaly, so the power will gradually weaken.”

“I see. And if I wanted to resupply...”

“You would need to leave the mortal realm.”

“I understand.” Knowing all this, it made sense why this would be the best time to fight Iblis. “Can we win?” I asked.

“You aren’t to go racing off alone. At least take Anna with you.”

“Ah. So that’s why you brought up Anna earlier, huh?”

The reason she’d said I couldn’t reject Anna was that we needed her to fight Iblis.

Ira pointed a finger at me. “You have reclaimed the holy sword Balamung from Bifrons’s castle. It used to be the Hero of Fire’s weapon—have the Hero of Light wield it. That, combined with you and your anima... Well, I’m sure you can win!”

Huh. I hadn’t known about the sword until now. *Balamung*...

“That’s the sword Sasa broke, right?” I remembered the tournament in Great Keith. It hadn’t seemed all that strong to me.

“Y-Your friends are just weird! What’s with that *Super Star*?!”

“Well, I’ve gotta agree with that...”

“Anyway! You happen to have anima now, so we need to make good use of it!”

“I see...” I felt like I understood the strategy Ira was going for. Then, suddenly, an idea sparked in my mind. “If I went in like this...do you think I could challenge the Seafloor Temple?”

“Huh?” Ira’s eyes went wide.

“What do you think, Ira?”

“W-Well, with anima, there’s certainly the *possibility*, but— Wait! Was *that* Noah’s plan?!”

This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. Even when I’d taken Cain, we

hadn't made any progress. However, with Anna now awakened...

"S-Say...Makoto Takatsuki... Are you serious? Are you not going to fight Iblis? If we fail here..." She tugged at my sleeve with teary eyes.

A girl with—literally—otherworldly beauty was crying in front of me. That wasn't fair. I had to decide whether to go to Noah...or to fight Iblis.

What will you do?

Challenge the Seafloor Temple

Challenge Iblis

A screen floated in the air, just out of Ira's eyeline. *RPG Player*. Every time it showed up, I was faced with really difficult decisions.

Ira was staring at me like she was an abandoned puppy. *That's a dangerous look.*

After thinking it over, I picked "Challenge Iblis."

"I wouldn't have even known about the anima if you hadn't told me," I said firmly. "So I'll follow the mission and fight Iblis. I can take my time with the temple."

I couldn't prioritize my own wants here. The fate of the world was at stake.

I thought Ira would be happy about the decision, but she just looked confused. "What did you just do?"

That was a weird question.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Uh... Huh? Nothing. I thought I just saw the future warp, but...I guess I was imagining things. Okay! You'll fight Iblis! Thank goodness..."

Her expression shifted to relief. She put her hand on my shoulder and leaned into me. A pleasant scent wafted into my nose—something floral, perhaps?

She really doesn't have any sense of personal space, huh?

Ira must have read my thoughts because her eyes darted to mine. "Are you *that* desperate for a woman? You've got so many cuties making moves on you."

"I'm the serious type when it comes to relationships."

"And yet I can feel you staring at my chest."

“That flat thing?”

There was a heavy silence.

“What?” I asked.

The stuffed animals near the bed all suddenly stared at me, eyes glinting, and I could hear the snip of the scissors opening and closing.

Whoops... Touched a nerve.

“That was a lie,” I said quickly. “I was just entranced by your beauty.”

“Very well.”

Ira hummed happily, puffing her chest out. She was pretty self-conscious... Actually, maybe that was normal for goddesses. Noah was always talking about being the cutest and such.

While we’d been bantering, my surroundings had started to grow distant. *I’ll be waking up soon.* This conversation had been a lot to take in, so I’d need to get it all straight in my head.

“I’m counting on you, Makoto Takatsuki.”

“I won’t let you down, Ira.”

With that, I accepted her request.



Momo wasn’t there when I woke up.

It was hard to tell the time in Labyrinthos, but it was probably past noon.

“I overslept...” I muttered to myself.

I got out of bed and then headed to the lake to wash up. Some people offered me a meal as I was walking there, but I declined, deciding to catch some fish myself as a bit of rehab. I wanted to test out the stuff Ira had told me about anima. For these tests, I needed to be mostly out of sight, so I headed behind one of the huge waterfalls that poured into the lake.

The roar of the water was the only noise around me—there were no signs of people. However, there were plenty of elementals. I glanced around and saw them all playing.

Just as I was thinking of what spell to cast, I heard someone call my name.

It was a familiar voice—Anna’s. Ira’s words about the confession ran through my head.

Yeah... There was no getting around a prophecy from a goddess.

Are you listening, Makoto Takatsuki?! You need to agree! Ira called out in my head.

Back again, Ira? Weren't we just talking?

Also...Ira would be watching this. That just made it harder.

Goddess, you said that you were counting on me...so stop peeping!

I-I'm nervous about whether it'll go well!

Apparently, she felt the need to micromanage everything.

Ira, you know you need to learn how to delegate properly, right?

Sh-Shut up! Just focus on Anna!

Haaah, fine.

Anna quickly approached me. Her cheeks were rosy, which made her look cute... I couldn't help but see Princess Noelle, though.

"I-I wanted to talk to you!" she exclaimed.

And here it was—she was just about to confess to me, apparently.

"S-Sure..." I answered nervously.

Now, Hero Makoto Takatsuki! Win her heart!

Keep it down in there! I can't concentrate!

And so, with Ira watching closely, the confession event began.

◇ Anna's Perspective ◇

Several years ago, my mother's birth village on the floating continent was attacked by the demon lord's army. I was now spending my time in my father's small village. Both of my parents had already passed away, and my mother's friend was taking care of me—the Hero of Fire, Teacher Olga.

She had a fairly sturdy build for a woman.

"Ease up on the training, Abel," she said to me, her voice concerned. "You look tired."

I *was* swaying on my feet as I practiced my sword swings. She was training alongside me, but she hadn't even broken a sweat.

"I can't. If I'm going to avenge my parents, I need to become a strong hero like you!" I insisted. "I need to train *more*."

"You're so earnest, Abel. Just like your mother."

She gently ran a hand through my hair. Though the weight was a reassuring presence on my head, I also felt unhappy about being treated like a child. I looked down at my arms. Unlike hers, they were spindly.

Unreliable.

“Don’t get too caught up in that thinking,” she told me. “You descend from a race composed solely of women. I’ve got beastman blood, so I’m bigger and stronger. It’s just a difference in our races.”

“But...”

“Just keep at it. I’m sure you’ll be special.”

The reason she said “special” was almost certainly because of the powers inside of me—I possessed the skills of both a hero and a priestess. Apparently, there had never been another person like me, and because of my uniqueness, she had high expectations for my potential.

“I’ll get strong enough that I can protect you!”

She chuckled sadly. “You will? You’ll protect me? Well, that’s good to hear.”

My own mood dropped at the sad look on her face. She’d lost her partner to the demon lord’s armies. Apparently, the fatal blow had come in the heat of combat, and it had been meant for *her*. Ever since then, she’d been alone. She no longer teamed up with the other heroes—preferring to fight on her own.

She’d taken me on because she’d known my mother and because I was an orphan. Some day, I wanted to be able to fight alongside her. That was my goal.

I didn’t rest, just continued swinging my sword.

“I’ve spent all this time alone...but I hope you have comrades you can eventually let into your heart. And maybe, someday, even a lover of your own.”

Her murmur seemed to come out of nowhere.

I snorted. “That last bit’s never going to happen. Just look at my body.”

I was in the strange position of being both an avian (so, a woman) and a human (but male). Perhaps my body image played a role in this, but I’d never felt romantic affection for someone, and I was sure I never would. If I had to say, the only person I felt close to was Teacher Olga. That was more familial than anything, though.

“Are you sure? Your mother was so passionate that she crossed the boundaries of race to marry your father. And that was *despite* the avians being against interracial marriage. You carry her blood within you, so I’m sure you’ll meet your fated one.”

I let out a listless sigh and a meaningless acknowledgment, then directed my attention back to my sword.

“So, what traits would you want in a marriage partner?” she asked teasingly.

She was actually fond of this kind of conversation.

Marriage, though...

I couldn’t even imagine it.

“Well, first off, they’d need to be stronger than you.”

“That’ll be difficult.” She chuckled. “If you ever *do* find someone like that, make sure you tell them how you feel, okay? With the world how it is, who knows when you’ll ever see them again.”

“If they’re stronger than you, then no one can beat them.”

But even Teacher Olga, with all her strength...couldn’t beat a demon lord.

So I...



“U-Um...” I stammered, forcing the words out of my throat.

“Y-Yeah? What is it, Anna?”

He was usually so calm, but he seemed oddly flustered now. I took a mental breath.

Calm down. Just tell him how you feel...

“Makoto...I...well...have...f...fee...”

“Anna?”

I couldn’t say it. They were five simple words—why couldn’t I spit them out?!

As he looked at me, I felt my body heat up. What was I talking about?! I’d never felt romantic affection for a person, right? And yet my heart was racing.

Calm down. He has his “precious person” waiting for him back in...well, wherever he’s from.

He won’t reciprocate.

I’d heard about them from Momo. Remembering that calmed me down.

Right. I knew what his answer would be. Regardless of the outcome, all I needed to do was tell him how I felt.

Right, let's go!

"P-Please marry me!"

"Wha?"

The look on his face was the most surprised I'd ever seen him.

"Oh."

That was when I realized the stupidity of what had just left my mouth.

What was that?! No! That wasn't what I wanted to say!

It was all because I'd been thinking about that conversation with Teacher Olga. I'd blurted out something ridiculous.

"Marriage...marriage..." He trailed off for a moment. "That wasn't what I was expecting... Hmm..."

H-Huh? He was actually thinking about it? D-Did I have a chance?

"Shut up a second, Ira... I'm thinking."

"Makoto?"

I stepped toward him as he muttered to himself. He looked up at me again.

"Anna."

"Yes?!"

I put a hand on my heart as it pounded away, waiting to see what he'd say next.

"I...have someone waiting for me to go back home. So I can't marry you."

I felt my chest constrict.

"Oh..."

He already had a "special someone." I'd known this. There was no way he'd...tie himself down to me. Why had I gotten my hopes up?

"Ira, c'mon. Seriously, quiet down... I'm hanging up."

I was a bit out of sorts thanks to my feelings being unrequited, so I didn't really process what he said. Even so...

Teacher...I did it. But being rejected hurts. I think I might cry...

"Anna," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder.

"Y-Yes?"

The person I liked was right in front of me.

"You *are* important to me too, though."

"Huh?"

My heart sped up again.

“So...I’ll protect you, from any enemy you might face.”

I felt...so happy. No one had ever said anything like that to me before.

“Makoto...”

Before I knew what I was doing, my arms were wrapped around the back of his neck. He looked surprised, but he soon smiled back at me.

C-Could I really do it? Slowly, I brought my face closer to his...

“Hold it, Anna! What are you doing?!” came a sudden yell.

“Huh?”

“Wah?!”

Makoto had vanished from where he’d been right in front of me. That was Momo’s *Teleport*.

“Anna, you were trying to get ahead! You didn’t say anything about doing *that*!”

“M-Momo...you were watching?!”

She was furious, almost spitting like a cat. However, she soon slumped.

“Ah...” Momo sighed. “I thought Sir Makoto wouldn’t reciprocate my feelings since he has his lover back home... But why’s he answering yours? I suppose *I’m* the problem...”

“N-No,” Makoto stuttered. “You’re just as important!”

“Really?” She looked between us doubtfully. “Just as important?”

Were we? It felt like he was just about to let me kiss him... *That is certainly more than most friends do*. Were his morals really that loose? No, no, that couldn’t be it. He was a serious person.

My head was spinning, and while I was trying to recover, Momo cornered him.

“So, what kind of person is your partner?” she asked. “I was too scared to ask before.”

“My partner? Uh, well...”

“I’m interested too!” I exclaimed.

“Anna?!”

Of course I was. What kind of person were they? They had to be just as amazing as him.

“Well...” he mumbled, awkwardly stalling his answer.

“Sir Makoto!”

“Makoto!”

Momo was as forceful as ever, and for once, I was following her

example.

He sighed in resignation and then opened his mouth.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

Things had gotten out of hand. Thanks to Ira's warning, I'd expected and been ready for Anna's confession. However, I *hadn't* expected Momo to interrupt, and I also hadn't anticipated that they might ask about the girls I was with.

What're you going to do? Ira asked. *You can just be stupid honest, but at least say that Anna's cuter than them.*

I can't do that!

Still, Anna was definitely a real beauty—cute too.

Momo and Anna were staring silently at me. They weren't going to let me get out of this.

"Umm, well, she's a red-haired elf. A mage..."

I continued telling them about Lucy—about the monster attack, and fighting the griffin and the blight monsters with her. Since my experiences were from a thousand years in the future, there were probably hundreds of discrepancies, but neither of them seemed to notice.

"An elf mage..."

"You seem to enjoy talking about her..."

The two of them had slumped. *Ack, I said too much! Should've cut it short.* But they'd just continued asking questions and I'd kept answering. Time to move on.

"And, well, the second—"

"Wha?!"

"Th-There's a second?!"

What?! Makoto Takatsuki! Are you an idiot?!

Ira, it's not fair if I only tell them about Lucy.

And so, I told them all about Sasa.

"A friend...from your school?"

"Sir Makoto...where are you actually from?"

See, and because you mentioned your old world they're even more confused!

"And the third one..." I continued.

“What.”

“Um...Makoto?”

I carried on, describing Princess Sophia. The girls started looking at me doubtfully. *I wonder why. It's not like I was lying.*

“Finally, the fourth person...”

It was hard to explain Furiae, so I paused to think.

“Sir Makoto, you don't need to say anything else.”

“Makoto, I can't listen to any more.”

I tilted my head. “Oh. You don't want to hear about her?” That was helpful, but I kinda wanted to finish up since I'd come this far.

Were you...always this much of an idiot? Ira's exasperated voice echoed in my head.

That was rude.

“Making things up isn't good, Sir Makoto.”

“Four people is just too much. You should have just left it at two.”

Momo and Anna were both looking at me sympathetically.

“Hey! I'm not lying!” I protested.

Momo sighed. “You're so cute. You made up a girlfriend in your homeland.”

“That's a relief,” said Anna. “Don't worry, we really have f-feelings for you.”

“Ah! You took advantage of the confusion to confess! Well, I love Sir Makoto too!”

“L-Love?! You're going all in, aren't you?”

“I don't want to hear that from you! Especially since you tried to steal a kiss!”

The two of them had just started chattering away.

“Wait, why do you both think I'm lying?!” I yelled over them.

They turned to look at me blankly.

“Well, you're a virgin, aren't you?”

“You haven't had any experience with a woman, have you?”

I fell silent. Right. They'd found out about that.

Ga ha ha ha ha ha!!!

While I was reeling, Ira's cackling resounded in my mind.

Shut it, you.

“No one with four partners is going to be a virgin.”

“Ah, Momo, wait...”

I couldn't even argue! It definitely made sense!

“Don't say that, Momo. I'm sure Makoto has a reason. Right? Makoto?”

“Anna!” I exclaimed. “Please stop looking at me so...kindly!” I didn't want that saintly look directed at me! Even if she *was* actually a saint!

Good for you, Makoto Takatsuki. Your lovers are being classed as delusions. Anna is in a much better mood because of that. Well done.

Damn it! I'm not letting this go!

I kept trying to explain, but neither of them actually believed me. In the end, they made their own choices about my love life.

“Anna and I will be your lovers from now on,” declared Momo.

Anna smiled. “If you ask, I'll be happy to...”

“You're pretty wanton like that, Anna...”

“What?! I'm not the one that slept in the same bed as him last night!”

“You looked into our room?!”

“A single wall means nothing to my eyes.”

“That's scary!”

Somehow, the two of them had ended up as my lovers...

Ah ha ha ha ha! All's well that ends well, Makoto Takatsuki! Owwww, my stomach hurts from all this laughing.

She'd spent the entire time busting a gut. Still, now my “bonds” with the Hero of Light were deeper, so at least one problem in regards to facing the Great Demon Lord had been solved.

“So the Hero of Light and the little one are the elementalists' lovers now?” Mel asked.

“That's right. My liege suddenly awoke to romance, it seems...”

“Well, what's the harm?” Johnnie asked. “There are sayings about great men and romance for a reason. He was instrumental in defeating the demon lord, so he can have his pick. Maybe he could take one of my daughters while he's at it.”

“He doesn't need any *more*, elf chief!”

I'd gone to talk to Mel and Johnnie about fighting Iblis, and Dia had been with them for some reason. The three were apparently drinking—a few empty bottles were already strewn across the ground.

Elementals could drink?



Mel noticed me first when I walked in, and she teasingly said, “Well, if it isn’t the man of the hour.”

“My lieeege, I’m lonely...”

In contrast with the grin on Mel’s face, Dia looked sulky.

“Scuse me,” I said, sitting near them.

“I’m glad you’re here!” Johnnie exclaimed. He was the first to speak up once I’d sat down. “Let’s drink together!”

There was no sign of his usual reserved demeanor. He pressed a drink into my hand, and while we shared some booze, he did his best to convince me to take one of his daughters as a bride. He’d been a great help so far, but I dreaded to think what Anna and Momo would say if I agreed to his proposition, so I just turned him down politely.

He looked disappointed but didn’t try to press the issue.

“My lieeege, pay attention to me too...” Dia complained, leaning against me.

“Sorry, sorry,” I said, stroking her beautiful blue hair. She’d saved me so many times. I probably wouldn’t still be alive if not for her. I couldn’t be sure, but it felt like Dia might have been the one to help me in Highland against the stampeding monsters.

It wasn’t like I could ask her now, though. Elementals didn’t really have a concept of age. Maybe I’d ask her when I was back in the future.

Eventually, the drink was too much for Dia and she fell asleep in my lap.

“It’s unthinkable—treating one of the embodiments of disaster like that...” Mel was looking at us like she’d seen something horrifying. “My eyes didn’t deceive me, then. You were capable of defeating the demon lord.”

“It wasn’t me that did it,” I countered.

“I’m impressed you can keep a straight face while saying that. You used *divine rank time magic*. Bifrons was utterly terrified of you.”

“He was?”

My memories of the whole thing were kind of vague. Maybe because I’d had *Calm Mind* set to 100%.

We kept talking for a while, and then the reason for my visit finally came up.

“You came to speak to us, didn’t you?” Johnnie asked, draining the rest of his drink.

I had a drink as well, but it was a spirit similar to sake, so I couldn't gulp it all down at once like that. Johnnie sure could hold his booze.

"Did you?" Mel asked.

"Well...yeah."

"Perhaps you should rest for a while first? You *did* only just defeat the demon lord." She sounded a bit exasperated with me, though she was still savoring her drink—something that looked like red wine. Honestly, you could have painted a portrait of her in that pose.

So...where to start?

I'd already told Anna and Momo about going after Iblis. Neither had looked *happy*, but they'd agreed.

Johnnie and Mel were the only two I still needed to ask...but I honestly felt bad. They'd just fought a demon lord, and it felt wrong to request that they put themselves in danger again. Of course, I'd gotten the revelation—read: impossible demand to eliminate Iblis—from Althena, so that's why I was back in the past to begin with.

"You're planning on going after the Great Demon Lord next, aren't you?" Johnnie asked while refilling his drink. "I'll join you."

"Huh?"

"What?"

Mel and I both spoke in unison. Mel was the first one to actually *respond* with words, though.

"That's ridiculous! We should gather our forces on the continent first. With the demon lord defeated, the warriors hidden across the regions will gather here. There are other demon lords as well! Iblis should come after that!"

Her protest made perfect sense. In fact, that'd been my plan before I'd talked to Ira.

"Momentum is everything in war. In terms of strength, they will win. We need to follow through." Johnnie finished his refilled drink in another single slug... Was he drinking too much?

"For the love of— You are far too quick-tempered, Sir Johnnie. Elementalist, you convince him."

Mel turned the conversation back to me, clearly expecting me to be against it. I felt kind of bad now.

"Ira said we should go straight for Iblis," I told her.

“What...the...?”

“Of course the Goddess of Fate understands war,” Johnnie said cheerily. Conversely, Mel seemed uneasy.

“Mel...if you’re against it, then—”

“It’s fine. I will lend you my strength. I promised, after all.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t make me say it again.”

“Thank you.” I bowed to them both.

“Mmmh... My liege’s...invincible...” I heard Dia murmur in her sleep.

I’d have to request that she keep helping out as well. With that conversation over with, I threw back the drink Johnnie had poured me, choking on it slightly.

So I got them all to agree...

And thus, I had everyone on board with the plan to challenge Iblis.

◇ Early Morning of the Next Day ◇

“So we’re already leaving...” Mel said. Her face looked somewhat weary.

“Sorry, Mel. Ira kept rushing me in my dreams last night. I didn’t get much sleep because of it...and I made sure to let her know how I felt about that.”

Mel sighed. “You are certainly...free with your responses to the goddess.”

“So it’s finally time to take the general’s head. My arm is singing for the chance.” Johnnie, for his part, had a fierce smile on his face and his sword at his waist. He was using some very Japanese phrases as well... Had he reincarnated from another world too? No way.

“Are you sure you don’t want to say goodbye to the townspeople?” I asked. “Won’t they miss you if you just leave without saying anything?” It certainly seemed like he intended to leave on the sly.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve left messages. For a long time, my mind has been solely focused on making sure my race doesn’t die out, but the town will survive without me. Once we defeat Iblis, I want to travel the world.”

“I...see.”

That followed the stories I’d read of the past—it was how history should

be. After the Great Demon Lord's defeat, Johnnie had traveled the world, leaving children practically everywhere he visited. Knowing that, his words just now made sense—he'd previously refrained from doing what he really wanted in order to give his people a chance to survive.

His general laissez-faire attitude definitely made it obvious that Rosalie was his descendant.

"Sir Makoto..." Momo seemed just as uneasy as ever.

"Don't worry, Momo."

"R-Right."

I would've honestly preferred not to drag her into the fighting, but telling her to stay behind probably wouldn't work. I'd just have to protect her.

"W-We're really going...aren't we?"

Anna's voice shook—Balamung hung at her waist. We'd need her strength to defeat Iblis.

Still...

I looked over the party again.

The Legendary Holy Dragon.

The Guardian of Highland since its founding, the Grandsage.

The Hero of Springrogue, Johnnie.

And finally, the savior, the Hero of Light, Anna.

The legendary party's all together...

Of course, I hadn't expected Abel and Anna to be the same person.

Was it really okay for me to be part of this?

None of it'll happen without you!!! Ira's voice yelled in my head.

Her voice was beautiful...but I really wished she'd use it more gently.

I'm busy being rushed off my feet for breaking the divine laws!

This time, it wasn't just her voice—an image of her with dark bags under her eyes floated into my mind. Apparently, she was putting in overtime pretty much 24/7. Working as a goddess was like working for some really shady company... Still, I kinda felt like part of the problem was with *how* she worked.

Listen up! You'll definitely win...because if you don't, I'll lose my position...

Her voice sounded way too serious.

I knew it'd be chaos if the townspeople saw us before we left, so we

worked quickly to depart before they did. Just as we were getting ready to leave, I heard footsteps.

“I came to see you all off,” came the gentle voice of Estelle. I’d been all but certain that she was going to come with us, but she’d insisted that she wasn’t adept at combat and that she’d just slow us down.

“We’ll see you later, Estelle,” I said.

“Indeed. Take care. However, before you leave, I wish to pray for your victory.” She put her hands together and bowed her head slightly.

Fate Magic: Blessing of the Goddess.

Her body was enveloped in light. Then, she stepped up to Anna and took her hand, placing a kiss on its back. The place her lips touched glowed slightly.

“What was that?” Anna asked.

The priestess smiled. “It was a spell that grants luck. Ranged attacks like arrows or spells should miss you now.”

Wow! A buff from a priestess! That sounded great. I waited excitedly as she went to Momo and Johnnie, but then...she ignored me.

U-Uh?

“Um, Estelle?”

She giggled. “You already have anima from my goddess. My measly little spell is unnecessary for you. If anything, it would interfere.”

Aww, but I wanted my buff...

You already have the best luck you can get! Ira complained.

Really...? It’d been a real struggle ever since I’d arrived, though.

“Well, it might not mean much, but I can give you a kiss for victory...”

Estelle smiled as she spoke, stepping closer.

Hm? Why were her hands going behind my head rather than for my hand?

“Sir Makoto! Let’s go!”

“Thank you for the blessing, Estelle!”

Momo and Anna bodily pulled me by the collar of my shirt.

Guh, my throat!

Estelle just waved placidly. She was teasing them, then.

“Honestly... Let’s go,” Mel said as she reverted to her dragon form. We all climbed onto her back, and she soared out of the dungeon town, flying into the dark clouds that covered the sky.

We were finally, *finally* heading for the fateful final battle with Iblis.

Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Heads for the Demon Continent

We rode atop a black dragon through endless dark clouds. This dragon just so happened to be Mel, who'd disguised herself with *Transform*. After all, a white dragon would've been far too visible. *It's always reassuring to know just how much she's capable of.*

"Elementalist, are you sure we're going in the right direction?" Mel asked. "It's quite the detour."

"Yeah. Some of the demon lords' armies are blocking the other way, and we need to avoid them."

Momo tilted her head, looking doubtful. "How can you tell that the demons are there, Sir Makoto?"

"Not even *I* can see that far with *Clairvoyance* and my elven sight..." Johnnie muttered.

"I saw the future," I told them. "It's a really useful skill."

Their expressions grew pinched. It wasn't like I was lying, so why were they looking at me like that?

They all think you're getting more inhuman, Ira told me.

And how was that my fault? *Future Sight* kept triggering on its own, without any input from me. I wasn't the one doing anything weird.

It will take a few days to reach Iblis's castle. Don't waste too much anima.

Well, I didn't want to use the skill, but I couldn't exactly control when it activated.

A-ny-way! Just don't use up all your strength, okay?!

Sure thing.

Ira was getting chatty, just like Noah always was. *I wonder how my goddess is doing...*

"What are you thinking about?" Anna asked, peering at my face.

"Uh, someone from my home," I deflected. It wasn't like I could talk

much about Noah.

“Ooh, one of those four lovers?” she asked with a pout.

I thought you didn't believe me about that?

“Not quite,” I replied. “Someone else.”

“There's a fifth?!” she and Momo cried in unison.

“Makoto has another imaginary girlfriend,” Anna whispered to Momo.

“I wonder what the story is this time. You ask.”

“Wha?! No way. You do it.”

“It'll just be so awkward. I can't bear it.”

“Guys, I can hear you.” I interrupted. *Listen* had helped me eavesdrop once again.

That topic of conversation soon fizzled out, and we chatted more generally for the remainder of our journey.

Once we landed, Johnnie scouted around for somewhere suitable to camp.

“Let's rest here,” he said. He used wood magic to create a table and chairs, and even several simple beds.

Those are some useful spells. He's really good with them too.

Mel set up a barrier, and the other two started preparing food.

I looked around for something I could do to help, but...I couldn't find anything. So, with no tasks to complete, I decided to kill time by training with Dia. I used water magic to conjure all kinds of creatures, making them fly, run around, and even talk. It was really fun.

“What in the world...? Why would you want to make your spells talk?” Mel asked, looking uncomfortably at them.

“Well, saint rank spells can talk,” I said somewhat proudly, remembering the spell Lucy's mom had shown off in Springrogue. That spell had been based on a fire angel. I had finally reached that kind of level—albeit only with water magic.

“Having a ‘conversation’ with your own spells is for strengthening them and exerting control. I hardly think you need to allow them to speak freely...”

“I can use those spells as well, but I don't use them like you,” Johnnie added.

U-Uh?

Bluntly, the way you use magic is bizarre, you know that, right?

What?! No way! Ira, you're agreeing with them?! Noah praised me for that!

Noah...why can't you teach your apostles how to do things efficiently?

My goddess had told me that there weren't really any rules to magic, so I should just do what I wanted. Were my spells inefficient? Now that I thought about it, had I stopped growing recently? I pulled out my Soul Book to look for proof.

"Say, Dia." I showed her my Soul Book. "My water magic mastery hasn't gone up from 999 at all. Why do you think that is?"

"Hm...one of *their* magic tools. I don't know much about those numbers, but you are certainly getting stronger, my liege."

"I am?"

I couldn't personally tell, but according to Dia, my water magic *was* getting better. I wondered when the number would go up...

A voice suddenly came from behind me, breaking me out of my staring contest with my Soul Book.

"Makoto♡, dinner will be done soon," Anna announced. She put her arms over my shoulders and leaned on me. Lately, she'd been a lot more touchy-feely.

"You've been working hard today," she said. "Take a look at my magic once we've eaten."

Then, she pulled me toward the food. She'd been tense when the journey had first started, but she seemed to have calmed down a lot now. I was glad for it.

Of course she has. Any girl would be happy to spend time with the guy they have feelings for, said Ira.

Ahead, the battle with Iblis was waiting for us.

Be good to her, Ira added. *It'll make the Hero of Light skill stronger.*

I sighed mentally. Stringing her along for such calculating reasons made the feelings seem so hollow. Still, her *Hero of Light* skill was the only thing we could use to attack Iblis. Apparently, the skill was strongly linked to its user's emotions. So because of that, I couldn't hurt her feelings.

Throughout the meal, she was smiling as she talked with me. Our dinner consisted of grilled meat from the animals they'd hunted, fruits they'd gathered, and bread we'd brought with us from Labyrinthos. Everything

was delicious.

After dinner, Momo and Anna joined me for training. Mel—having carried us all this way—lay resting off to the side, while Johnnie sipped at the alcohol he'd brought with him.

Before long, the two girls' concentration ran out and they took a break. I kept practicing my water magic. Lately, it seemed like I could keep training forever without getting tired—using my water magic no longer caused me any fatigue. As such, I was a little worried about whether my practice even counted as training.

I cast my eyes around and happened to catch sight of Johnnie peering upward.

"What are you looking at?" I asked him.

"Well...these are cherry trees."

"They are?"

That prompted me to look around too. Though they didn't have any flowers at the moment, the trunks and branches certainly looked like cherry trees. That was odd, though—this was another world, not Earth.

Long ago, someone who was transported to this world spread them, Ira explained. They are by no means rare here.

Huh... I hadn't spent much time looking at the cherry trees in my old world, but it felt almost nostalgic to see them now. Of course, they had no flowers or leaves, so it also felt a little sad.

"Well then, let's take the time to add some flowers," Johnnie remarked.

"Huh?"

He casually muttered some incantation. Suddenly, the cherry trees grew buds, and those buds unfurled into light pink blossoms. *This was just what I wanted to see...*

"Wooooow..."

"So pretty..."

Anna and Momo's eyes were shining with wonder.

"Oh, that was wonderful," I heard Mel say. *So his spell was impressive, even to an ancient dragon.*

In minutes, the trees were all in full bloom. They'd stick out like a sore thumb, but I figured that Mel's barrier should keep the monsters from finding us. A gust of wind sent pink blossoms fluttering through the air.

"Beautiful, no?"

I nodded. "It's great—a real blizzard of blossoms."

"Let's have a flower viewing," Johnnie suggested. "Drink up, Sir Makoto."

"Thank you."

I was supposed to be training, but I still gratefully took the drink. There was an elegance to this whole atmosphere.

"Do you like these flowers, Teacher?" Momo asked me.

"I do. They grow near my hometown."

I wanted to show them to Sasa. I was sure she'd love them.

"Then we'll plant loads of these when we get back to the dungeon town."

"Good plan, Momo. I'll help."

Momo and Anna seemed excited about the prospect. I was all for adding more cherry trees to this world. I gazed up at the blossoms. *It's been so long since I've seen a sight like this.*

With that, the day ended peacefully.

The next two days were spent crossing the continent. Finally, we arrived at the Dark Seas, which was the ocean separating the western and northern continents. Just as we were getting tired of the expanse of water beneath us, we finally spotted some gray land.

"I see it."

"Mel, is that...?"

"It is—the domain of the demons. It is the place you humans call the northern continent."

Conversation lessened significantly after that. Even Johnnie seemed tense.

The northern continent was also known as the demon continent.

Now that I think about it...this is the first time I've been here...

In the future, I'd fought against demons and demon lords from the northern continent, but I'd never set foot there. This was our first step onto the continent that was home to Iblis.

In a word, the continent was "gray." The ground, the trees, the rivers, and the sky—all of them were desaturated and dark.

"The land didn't use to look like this..." Mel said mournfully.

"It didn't?" I asked.

“Since that thing calling itself Iblis arrived, the whole continent has been without light.”

“Huh...”

So the land looked this way because of Iblis...

Johnnie suddenly turned and glared into the distance.

“We’ve been spotted.”

Anna shivered. “I can feel someone watching us.”

If Momo’s expression was anything to go by, she seemed to feel the same tension.

My *Scout* skill hadn’t even pinged... I looked around with *Clairvoyance*, but I couldn’t spot anything—not even a single set of eyes staring at us through the gloom.

I was fretting about it, but then Mel wiped those worries away. “You need not be concerned. We ancient dragons ruled this region for a long time. If you are with me, you will not be attacked by the demons.”

That was great. “Nice one, Mel.”

“So, what is our next move, Elementalist? Iblis’s castle, Eden, is a floating construction with no fixed location. Searching for it randomly is going to be no help.”

“Um...wait a minute.” Rushing around without a plan would just waste our energy.

Iraaaa, can you hear me? I kinda want you to tell me where Iblis’s castle is.

I leaned wholeheartedly into relying on the goddess, but...

Ma... Ta... You...nee...there...

Huh? I could barely understand that. Ira? You there? She said *something* after that, but I couldn’t make out even a single word.

“Elementalist, what’s wrong?”

“It’s harder to hear Ira now that we’re here,” I told Mel.

“What?!” Momo looked panicked. “That’s awful!”

I’d expected this, though. The demon continent was Iblis’s domain.

Ira had warned me about the barrier that spanned across the whole continent—one that blocked out the Sacred Deities. Ira was probably in the middle of tuning the frequency (or something along those lines) to get the connection back.

“Let’s just land somewhere. There are some things I want to check out.”

“Very well.”

With that, Mel landed in a nearby open area. We climbed down from Mel’s back and stepped onto the gray land.

“So here we are...”

This was the demon continent—a world of gray as far as the eye could see. It felt like I’d suddenly gone colorblind. But the most important thing was...

“Dia,” I called.

“Yes, my liege?”

“How does the area...feel?”

This was the potential biggest problem—I needed to know whether my elemental magic skill was affected.

“It isn’t bad. The elementals seem lively.”

“I see.” I let out a sigh of relief. Apparently, this wasn’t like the Seafloor Temple with its ridiculous barrier that blocked all elementals. My magic wasn’t going to cause me any issues on the continent.

Time to see about the others.

“The wind, ground, and fire elementals all seem fine too,” Johnnie proclaimed as he flipped his long hair out of the way.

He could use four types of elementals. I was jealous.

“I feel even stronger than normal!” Momo exclaimed.

Well, she was a half-vampire, so I could see how this place would suit her. Mel used to live here, so she wouldn’t have any problems either. That only left...

“I don’t particularly like it here.”

Right. Of course Anna wouldn’t cope well with this place. Her face was pallid.

“Let’s make camp nearby and rest,” I suggested. “We should get used to this environment before we do anything else.” Anna needed to be at full power since she was our main combatant.

“So, where to camp...” Johnnie looked around the area with a seasoned eye.

Suddenly, we heard a yell in the distance.

“Lady Helemmelk!”

We all frantically looked around for its source. Then, we saw...

A ghost?

It was a completely translucent boy.

We'd all tensed for a fight, but judging from the boy's expression, we didn't need to worry.

"Have I...met you before?" Mel asked.

The ghost boy deflated a little, looking sad.

"Hah... Well, it has been about two hundred years. You saved my sister and me back when I was alive. My family were cambions, so we had nowhere to live—we also had no one there to help us fend off monster attacks. Except you, Lady Helemmelk! You helped us! I haven't forgotten the debt I owe you!"

"I-I see..." she replied awkwardly. Apparently, she didn't remember at all.

"Would you stay in my village? Since the Great One began to rule the world, this continent has been at peace. Even weak ghosts like us can exist in safety. We'll be glad to welcome you."

"My..."

Mel cast a look my way—her eyes were asking what I wanted to do.

Then, an *RPG Player* screen appeared in the air.

Will you stay in the village?

Yes

No

Hmm, what to do...?

There was a definite possibility that this was a trap. After all, it was a village of demons. Ghosts were known to be weak, but a large number of them could still be dangerous. Even so...

"Let's go, Mel."

"If you say so." She turned back to the ghost. "We will join you."

Johnnie, Anna, and Momo looked unsure, but they all ended up agreeing with me. If it came to it, we could all just climb on Mel's back and fly away.

"So those are your companions," the boy said. "This way."

He turned and began guiding us deeper into the gloomy forest.

“We’re there, Lady Helemmelk.”

The village was surrounded by a simple fence. I’d been expecting a settlement of ghosts, but all sorts of races were living here—orcs, goblins, skeletons, and other monsters. They all had rather odd features.

“These are noncombatants,” Johnnie murmured.

I nodded in agreement. They were all either young, old, or women. None of them looked overly strong, so this probably wasn’t a trap.

Just as I was heading out for a walk around the village...

“M-Makoto,” Anna stuttered, grabbing my sleeve.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

““What’s wrong...?” This is a village of demons!” she whisper-yelled at me. “We need to be careful!”

Momo looked uneasily at me as well. They seemed to be the only two nervous about us being here. Mel was talking to a demon who looked to be the village chief. The villagers looked at Mel with terrified expressions, which just showed how exceptional they all thought ancient dragons were. Johnnie had already decided that the village was safe—he’d wandered off somewhere.

This was my first time on the demon continent, so I wanted to explore. After all, this was a whole new continent—how could I not be excited?!

To!!! G...t!!! came a burst of noise in my mind. It was probably Ira, but her voice wasn’t clear. Apparently, she hadn’t managed to find the right channel yet. Keep at it, Ira!

Why...y—!!! ...ought!!!

I had a feeling that she might’ve been angry with me, but oh well. I couldn’t hear her. And if I had understood what she was saying, what could I have done?

“Anna, Momo, if we stay tense, we’ll just exhaust ourselves. You should relax your bodies and minds.”

Anna let out a sigh. “You are far too carefree.”

“What are your nerves even made of?” Momo asked.

I was trying to be as careful as possible, but they were looking at me in exasperation. *That hurts, guys.*

Slowly, I made my way around the village. Since we were with Mel, the villagers seemed to welcome us. Ancient dragons were really respected here. I looked for food, weapons, armor, and other things, but they didn’t

have any shops that catered to outsiders. This was a poor village, and the people here had been relegated to a subsistence lifestyle.

The only real thing I could do was gather information, so I chatted with some of the younger demons. This *was* just a little village tucked away in a corner of the continent—I doubted that there would be any consequences if I just asked some questions.

I inquired about anything that had happened recently, but since they didn't have much contact with other settlements, all I heard about were countless identical days.

The only uncomfortable aspect of these conversations came when the demons would attribute their peace to Iblis. Apparently, before he'd appeared, there had been conflict between the strong demons and the demon lords. Weaker beings had suffered on this continent. Then, around a hundred years ago, Iblis had appeared and unified the demon lords, seizing control of the world. His reign was a peaceful one for demons.

I glanced to my side and saw Anna and Momo both looking awkward. After all, we were here to defeat their symbol of peace. As far as these demons were concerned, we were embodiments of pure evil, here to plunge the world into chaos. The two of them were earnest to their core, so this fact was bothering them.

I had another problem on my mind, though.

During all my conversations with the villagers, I'd sensed that something was *off*. It was a faint feeling, so I didn't notice at first. Eventually, when I got to examine the villagers closer I realized what the problem was.

They were charmed.

I could only detect this thanks to the *Charm* skill I'd been granted as Furiae's guardian knight.

In my old world, *Charm* would've been considered a form of brainwashing. As such, these charmed people weren't necessarily telling us the *truth*—I doubted that the village was really peaceful.

I'd wanted to stay for a night, but now, I knew it'd be dangerous to rest here. The villagers were just like the citizens of Laphroaig.

Speaking of Laphroaig, I wondered what their queen was doing. I found it hard to believe that she'd charmed the people living in this backwater village. Still, *Charm* was practically her signature spell—was there some

kind of link? I'd need to ask Mel about it later.

Either way, we shouldn't stay long, I decided. I wanted to get us out of here. However, before we left, I wanted to ask one last question.

"By the way, I noticed that there aren't many young men in the village, but that there are a lot of children and the elderly. Is there some kind of reason for that?"

Because of how poor the village was, I expected there to be some kind of arrangement—perhaps the young men were working away from home and sending money back.

"There is," replied one of the demons. "It's an awful reason. Apparently, some hero defeated Demon Lord Bifrons..."

Whoops, that answer hits a bit close... A bead of sweat ran down my cheek. News of Bifrons's death had spread all the way out here, to some little village in the middle of nowhere? I needed to make sure they didn't realize Anna was a hero.

The next words out of the demon's mouth only exacerbated those worries.

"Demon warriors from across the continent have been summoned by the Dragon Lord. They are going to take a million men and root out the humans responsible."

"What?!" Anna and Momo yelped in unison.

As they stiffened in shock, part of the picture book passed through my mind.

An army a million soldiers strong invaded from the demon continent, and the savior defeated them. The location of that victory became Symphonia, the capital of Highland.

This was a popular segment of the legend, even considering how well-known the legend was as a whole.

It's one thing after another...

I wanted to just rest my head in my hands, but we couldn't laze around. The next stage of history had already begun.

We had left the village and were on Mel's back. I'd just told Johnnie about the invading army.

"A million of the demon lords' troops are marching on our continent?" Johnnie asked in shock.

“Where are we going?” Anna asked.

Momo looked terrified. “What do we do now?!”

They were both tugging at my clothes. Of course, I didn’t have a concrete plan yet. An army of a million soldiers was not something you could leave alone, so we’d rushed out of the village as soon as possible.

I wanted to get Ira’s advice, but I still couldn’t hear her. *What should we do?*

Mel’s voice pulled me out of my confusion. “Elementalist, if they are gathering so many fighters, they’ll likely be in Zagan’s domain.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“There are only so many locations suitable for gathering such forces. The ancient dragons rule the continent, but they live at high altitudes. Those places are not convenient for amassing a large army.”

“I see...”

Mel was familiar with the geography, so she was almost certainly right.

“Are we going there, Sir Makoto?” Johnnie asked.

“What?!” Anna cried. “Johnnie, what are you thinking?!”

Momo just shook her head. “S-Sir Makoto, shouldn’t we go back to Labyrinthos and get everyone to evacuate?”

“There is nowhere left for them to go,” Johnnie replied calmly.

“Labyrinthos is the safest place for them.”

Momo whimpered.

Labyrinthos was like a natural fort—the people staying there would be the safest.

However, we certainly weren’t out of the woods just yet. Our party consisted of a mere five people, and we were just wandering around the demon continent, where a million-strong army was forming. If we were found, we’d be crushed in moments.

“Mel, can we recon the place from a distance?” I asked.

“We can...but are you sure?”

Even Mel seemed hesitant. Still, we had to do *something* about this. And so, we headed for the gathering of the armies.

“Wh-What is that...?”

“We can’t do anything...”

“There are so many...”

Anna and Momo's voices were shaking.

Scouting was one of the basics of war according to Johnnie, but even he seemed disheartened by what he saw.

Zagan's territory consisted of wide open plains. We had climbed a small mountain range adjacent to these plains, and we were looking down upon them.

As far as our eyes could see, the ground was covered by the army.

The stampede I'd once seen, as well as Zagan's own forces, paled in comparison. The sheer scope was too much for a human to really understand—I could feel my brain refusing to accept it as reality.

It was...for lack of a better word...hopeless.

"This is bad... They have combined their forces, Elementalist," Mel fretted.

She was, of course, in her human form again.

"Combined?" I asked.

At a glance, there were all sorts of demons and monsters in the area. The same could have been said of Bifrons's forces though, so what was so bad about this? I asked Mel to explain.



“Originally, there were three demon lords who ruled this continent. Astaroth, Zagan, and Forneus. You know that, correct?”

“Of course I do.”

That hadn’t changed, even a thousand years in the future. I’d heard a lot about how they ruled the demon continent.

“However, I can see subordinates of Goliath, Valac, Erinyes, and Barbatos here. Even some of the survivors of Bifrons’s forces are present.”

“Which means...”

I finally understood exactly what she’d meant by “combined forces.” This was *not* a good situation.

“There is a chance that the demon lords have gathered from around the world.”

“And their goal is to avenge Bifrons,” Johnnie said.

“I’m not sure about that...” I murmured. I then decided to pass along the information from Ira. “The demon lords are not particularly cooperative with each other. They aren’t generally that close.”

I wouldn’t expect them to immediately jump to vengeance over a fellow demon lord’s death...

“L-Let’s get away, Makoto...” Anna murmured.

“Sir Makoto...they’ll find us...” Momo added.

Both of them reached out to me.

Johnnie turned to me. “Sir Makoto, our target is the snake’s head, Iblis. We need to find his castle, so let us depart from here.”

Even Johnnie, who seemed to know no fear, was recommending that we retreat.

“Come on. Let’s go, Elementalist.”

Mel called out to me, and both Momo and Anna were sending pleading looks my way.

Our best move was obviously to leave. Even I knew that. I did. But still...

Will you fight the demon lords’ armies?

Yes

No

If it wasn't for that...

Floating in front of me were sparkling letters.

RPG Player.

Time after time, the skill had given me valuable advice at major points in my adventures. Now it was asking me if I was really willing to just leave things as they were.

I could feel my party members' gazes on me as I fretted about my decision.

...uki! Makoto Takatsuki!

Suddenly, a bell-like voice had just echoed in my mind.

Ira?

Apparently, she'd finally tuned to the correct station. Phew.

Wha?! What a—! You...?!

Ira?

Oh...maybe she hadn't quite finished up.

What were you thinking, purposefully getting close to the army?!!!!

My (figurative) ears were ringing.

"Owww." I couldn't help but frown.

Momo gazed at my expression and spoke, concern in her voice. "Sir Makoto, what is it?"

"Ira finally got through to me."

"That is all we could ask for. Ask her where Iblis is and we can travel there immediately," Mel pressed.

"Let's do that, Makoto," Anna added.

Johnnie nodded. "Indeed. Their forces are focused here, so now is our best chance to strike."

Before we set out though, I needed to ask the goddess something. I spoke out loud so everyone could hear.

"Ira, I need to know..."

I get it. You want to know where Iblis is. Leave it to me. I was looking into it while I was tuning the telepathy, so I know exactly where he is! Head nor—

"No, I didn't want to ask where Iblis is."

All five of them—physically present or not—exclaimed in shock. I continued the question.

"Will the army here find the town in Labyrinthos?"

My four companions grew wide-eyed in shock. I thought that the army probably would find the town—that was exactly why *RPG Player* was giving me the choice. The dungeon town was huge, and it had only grown after Bifrons's defeat. With a million demons tearing through the area, they could hardly hide. Then, when they were finally found...no one would survive. This was the demon lords' main fighting force. The citizens would be crushed like ants.

There was no response from Ira. *That in itself is an answer, I suppose.*

"Sir Makoto, what did she—?" Johnnie half-voiced the question. He was the person most invested in the town.

"Ira, they'll find it, won't they?" I asked again, but it was more of a statement. I spoke the words with a sense of certainty.

Johnnie grunted, his expression darkening.

"But...Sir Makoto," Momo whimpered.

"Makoto!" exclaimed Anna. "We need to head back and warn them!"

"Where will they hide?" Johnnie countered. "There are too many people."

"We ancient dragons will help...but there are too many citizens. We cannot hide everyone."

"We could move farther in," Anna suggested.

"The environment gets more treacherous the farther you go," said Johnnie, "and the citizens won't be able to carry on with their lives."

"I...see..."

"We have no time," Mel said gravely, "We need to go back."

Johnnie nodded. "We do."

"Makoto!"

"Sir Makoto!"

Their voices all echoed through my ears. As they did, I once again remembered a line from the book.

A million-strong army invaded from the demon continent and the savior defeated them.

I sighed. It seemed like it was fate. Now, it was just a matter of when and where we would strike.

Ira immediately read my mind.

Hold it right there! exclaimed Ira. *What are you...? You can't seriously be thinking that?!*

That's right, Goddess.

Wait, wait, wait! Listen to me! You can't do that! You can't!

Even though it was in my head, it sounded like her voice was echoing. Her guidance was almost certainly correct. In terms of safety, it made logical sense to abandon the town. But still...

Come on. Makoto Takatsuki, change your mind.

Her voice sounded pained. But surely there was some way we could help.

She gave a long pause.

I cannot believe how much of an idiot you are. When this is over, you're getting a full day of lecturing.

Thank you, Ira.

The goddess had agreed...albeit with strings attached.

Idiot...

I turned to the rest of my party.

"Everyone, listen to me, would you?"

◇ Anna's Perspective ◇

"Wha?"

I couldn't believe my ears. Had he *really* just said that?

"Let's defeat those million demons right here."

"M-Makoto," I stuttered.

"What's wrong, Anna?" he asked. My voice was trembling, but he sounded as calm as ever.

"Y-You really want to fight? You're...not scared?"

My legs were shaking. I was terrified. The people in the dungeon town had taken me in and had helped me to survive, so thinking about the danger they were in made my stomach turn. However, this army was a million soldiers strong... Taking them on couldn't be considered anything but suicide.

Before I could plead with him to reconsider, Makoto responded to my question.

"Of course I'm scared."

"Then...!"

I couldn't bring myself to say that we should abandon the town.

“One of the hardest parts of being a hero,” said Makoto, “is not being able to step away from a fight like this.”

I was startled. There was no hint of fear or nerves on his face—his tone sounded more resigned than anything.

“*However strong their opponent, a hero must fight.*” This was something my mentor had once said.

I wanted to be like her. How had Makoto managed to say the same thing? And...how had his voice calmed my trembling?

“Ira?” he muttered. “Well, I wanted to look at least a little cool... Ah, yeah, yeah, okay.”

He looked slightly conflicted.

“Um...what did she say?” I asked.

“She’s just a little pissed at me.”

He smiled mischievously. I couldn’t put a name to the odd feeling unfolding in my chest.

I took his hand firmly. “I want...”

I trailed off. *That’s all I can possibly say.*

“Let’s do our best together,” he murmured. He gently squeezed my hand back.

Arrayed in front of us was an army of a million fighters. There were so many bodies that they obscured the ground beneath them.

But as long as Makoto was at my side, I could forget some of my fear.

The other three, however, were panicked by his decision.

“Elementalist?! What are you saying?!”

“Sir Makoto, that’s absurd! We’ll die a pointless death.”

“Sir Makoto... Please don’t!”

Our other party members were obviously trying to stop him.

But then it happened.

“*Calm Mind*,” I heard him whisper.

“Mako—”

As I called out to him, I realized the air was...cold. It felt almost like we’d plunged into the depths of winter, and my breath misted in front of my face. The other three stopped in their tracks, mouths agape. I did the same.

There’d been a definite change in him. It was just like when he’d fought Bifrons. He’d become *something else*.

“Okay, Anna. Would you come with me?” he asked, turning to smile at

me. The smile didn't reach his eyes, though.

As I looked dazedly into his eyes, I spotted a glimmer of prismatic light in their depths. I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't even manage a response.

Suddenly, many beautiful blue-skinned women appeared and surrounded him.

"My liege, are we to march to battle?"

"Finally."

"I've been waiting for this."

Undyne.

So many of them.

Dia was there, but there were many more besides her—over a dozen stood around him. The mana surrounding them was enough to put the demon lord to shame, so even someone as strong as Lady Helemmelk felt insignificant in their presence.

"Anna?" Makoto asked.

"R-Right! I'm ready...Makoto."

Despite feeling overwhelmed by the pressure of their mana, I managed to nod and take his hand properly.

"M-Me too!" Momo insisted.

"Sorry, Momo, but the spell I'm going to use would hurt you all, so you can't come with me."

"B-But!" I immediately noticed a problem with what he'd said.

"Then what of Lady Anna?" Johnnie asked. "Isn't she going with you?"

If what Makoto had said was true, then surely his spell would affect me too...

"Anna, you need to protect yourself with your *Hero of Light* skill. If you do, my elemental magic won't harm you."

"G-Got it..."

He readily admitted that his spell was dangerous. Usually, he would never say anything like that. His demeanor right now...was a little frightening.

"Elementalist, you've been spotted," Lady Helemmelk said, pointing to the army.

A scouting force or something similar seemed to be heading our way. Though, it was hardly surprising that they'd spotted us—the amount of

mana coming off the Undyne was absurd. They would've noticed us no matter how far away they were.

"Mel, take Momo and Johnnie—get as far away as you can."

Lady Helemmelk was silent for a moment. She gazed at him intently. "Don't die, Elementalist."

With that, she took off. The army was currently moving to surround us, and some of the monsters broke off to chase her.

I was a little worried, but sure that Lady Helemmelk would be fine.

"Anna, take us over there with flight magic," Makoto said.

I gaped. Makoto was pointing at a spot in the center of the entire army. He wanted to put us right in the middle of a million enemies! And yet...he sounded so casual about it.

Our little hill would soon be surrounded, but the bulk of the army wasn't getting any closer. Maybe they were afraid of the mana from the Undyne.

However, we couldn't know when the army would decide to strike.

"Anna?"

Makoto had a blank look of confusion on his face. It was like he didn't understand what was causing me to delay. His attitude really annoyed me.

Damn it all! He's way too chaotic!

He generally seemed cautious, but during moments like this, he was always ready to plunge right into the fray. We were also constantly worried that he would die! I couldn't bear to watch him flirt with his demise, so I'd have to go with him.

"Makoto, I can't use the skill without sunlight, and I can't part the clouds on my own. Can you sort that out?"

"Oh, right."

He said something to Dia.

"Leave it to me, my liege!"

One of the Undyne vanished, flying into the sky. There was a soundless explosion, and then, the *Clouds of Darkness* broke apart, revealing an open blue sky.

He shattered Iblis's spell so easily...

Makoto was a truly astonishing person. Bathed in the sunlight, I could feel my body filling with strength. The light turned into aura, and I could feel myself calming down. This was another part of the *Hero of Light* skill.

Though, I'm still pretty much a mess compared to Makoto.

I could still hear my heart pounding in my ears, but my body had stopped shaking.

The army looked to be having a difficult time. It must've come as a real shock when the *Clouds of Darkness* suddenly broke apart. Formations splintered, and I could actually hear the demons' uproar. They must have realized that we had caused it, but even so, they didn't move to attack.

Apparently, the Undynes' mana was just that scary.

"Let's go, Anna."

"Okay."

I gripped his hand and let my wings unfurl. We floated gently into the air, slowly making our way to the center of their forces.

"Who are you?!" some general yelled.

"Stop! If you come any closer, we'll bring you down!" someone screamed before attacking.

At this point, the monsters began charging en masse, and the army sent wave after wave to strike us. There seemed to be no end to them—a dizzying number of enemies attacked, and yet, not one of them reached us.

Water Magic (Saint Rank): Ice Frontier.

The Undyne that Makoto was controlling conjured a barrier of ice. It started as a small circular barrier but gradually grew until it was the size of a small village. Everyone who crossed the barrier found themselves frozen and covered in snow. I was the only exception—my *Hero of Light* skill was protecting me.

So this was the indiscriminate spell he'd been talking about...

"Die, Hero!"

A demonic soldier covered in thick miasma yelled, charging. This was likely a demon of some renown. I readied my sword to defend. I calculated that the demon's blade would reach us in two seconds. My sword was clad in aura, and all I needed to do was swing it to remove the demon's head from his body.

Yet, even this powerful demon froze solid a few dozen steps away.

I let out a sigh, and my breath glittered in the air.

The world around us felt like a region of extreme cold. Even the air itself seemed to sting. If it weren't for my skill, I wouldn't have been able to keep standing. I wanted to move around and do something because I could feel myself slowing from the frigid temperature.

“Makoto, there isn’t anything for me to do,” I protested.

“It’ll be your turn soon,” he said.

“Aren’t you going to defeat them all?”

I’d relaxed enough to ask that question, but his expression remained serious.

None of the army could even get within sword’s reach. His barrier had colored the entire area white, as far as I could see. It was like a world of glittering frost—beautiful, but also deadly. Anything that set foot in this world would freeze to death.

Did he just want to keep the barrier up and stop them all in their tracks?

Amazing...

Suddenly, Makoto broke my reverie.

“You’re up, Anna.”

I jumped slightly. When I looked around, I spotted something nearby—something that was clearly different from the demons that had attacked so far.

A thick layer of miasma filled the air. Makoto looked up, and I followed his gaze.

Several figures gazed down at us.

“Are you the little Abel that the Great One was talking about?”

The woman’s voice was bright and out of place. Though she was inside Makoto’s barrier, she was still smiling cheerily. She was frightfully beautiful. Her eyes were crimson, and jet-black wings sprouted from her back. At a glance, I thought she was an avian, like me, but she was radiating waves of unpleasantness that told me she was different.

“Look closer, Erinyes—that is an avian woman. The Hero of Light is a man.”

The man who answered was no less good-looking than the woman, who was apparently named Erinyes. He wore fine clothing, like those a noble would wear, and his demeanor seemed rather refined.

However, looking at him made me feel disgusted. I scowled.

“I can feel Althena’s blessing on her,” argued the woman. “She’s definitely the Hero of Light.”

“But... That would mean that *His* foresight was wrong.”

At this point, a much older voice interjected.

“It matters not. We can find out the truth once she’s dead. Hurry up. It’s

far too cold here.”

It was hard to make out what that voice was saying. Every word was accompanied by what sounded like wingbeats. Despite the apparent age of this third figure, their miasma and general air of bloodthirstiness was the most intense.

The woman, Erinyes, scoffed. “You’re supposed to be Valac, and yet you shiver because of some human’s spell.”

“Silence, devil brat. Look, there are Undyne. I haven’t seen any in millennia. Why are they following some mere human?”

“That doesn’t make sense,” the handsome man remarked. “In this era, the elementals’ god has Cain as her apostle.”

“Ah, yes, I haven’t seen Cain in a while,” the woman trilled. “I wonder where he’s run off to.”

They were talking like we weren’t even here—it was all but impossible to interrupt them. Though there were only three of them, each felt just as imposing—or even more so—as Bifrons.

One of them had been called Erinyes, and another, Valac. *Were they...?*

Thud! The impact was massive. I looked in the direction it had come from, and...

Wh-When did he get here?!

I saw an enormous humanoid even bigger than Lady Helemmelk, and beside it was an even bigger quadrupedal monster.

No, it wasn’t a monster... The beast exuded miasma, even more so than the three in the sky.

The giant humanoid and the animal spoke, but I couldn’t understand what they said.

“Zagan, Goliath, yoohoo!” waved the black-winged woman. I felt my body stiffen at her words.

There was no way I’d mishear the names of the world’s rulers.

I heard Makoto sigh. “Five demon lords at once...” he muttered.

Those words made me feel dizzy. I wanted him to be wrong, but my mind wouldn’t let me refute the facts before me.

Erinyes, King of Fallen Heaven

Valac, King of the Flies

Barbatos, King of Devils

Goliath, the King of Giants

Zagan, the King of Beasts

Nine demon lords ruled the planet, and the majority of them were right in front of us.

Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Faces the Strongest Demon Lord

◇ Anna's Perspective ◇

We were surrounded by five demon lords who ruled the world.

“M-Makoto...” My voice shook as I tightly gripped his hand.

“Calm down, Anna.”

His voice did not waver. Instead, he gazed at the demon lords and put a hand to his chin like he was thinking.

He was right—I needed to calm down. I took a shallow breath. The air was tense.

Eventually, the silence was broken by a deep voice that carried well.

“You *heroes*, destroyers of the Undead King. You shall fall here.”

I was momentarily taken aback by the new voice. But then, I realized who it was.

Zagan.

Suddenly, Goliath roared. It felt like the ground had suddenly become water as massive tremors shook the area.

Goliath was charging at us.

“Dia.”

“Yes, my liege?”

“Stop him, would you?”

“Of course.”

With that, Dia—and several of the Undyne—attacked the giant.

Thousand Ice Cutter.

Water Dragon Flock.

Blades of ice filled the air, and the water dragons crashed on the giant like a tsunami. It looked practically apocalyptic.

Goliath roared again. This time though, there was a tinge of pain to it.

“A-Amazing...” I murmured.

“Don’t wait around, Anna. *Sword of Light*, would you?”

“R-Right...”

I tightened my grip on Balamung—the sword bequeathed to me by my mentor. I converted light into aura and then poured that into the blade. As long as there was sunlight, I had infinite mana.

I readied my attack.

“What is he?” asked Valac. “He has arch elementals completely under his control.”

Barbatos tilted his head in thought. “Hmm, intriguing. While I am unfamiliar with this world, I believe such fluid control of elementals among humans is a rarity. Perhaps he would like to join my subordinates.”

The pair of them were chatting—their demeanors were relaxed.

Are they not going to attack as well? Just as that thought passed through my mind, the area was bathed in red light.

Pain. Every pore of my body screamed. It felt like I was being stabbed by red-hot needles.

Zagan had blasted a ball of flames from his mouth.

“Hah!” I exclaimed, bisecting the ball. Makoto’s magic was weak to fire.

“Oh... So what about this? *Inversion Magic: Black Blade Blitz*.” Erinyes flapped the black wings on her back, creating a huge whirlwind.

“Ice Frontier.”

Makoto’s spell stopped the whirlwind dead, dispersing it immediately.

“What? That’s not fair...” Erinyes pouted.

The view around us was absurd. Huge rocks had been blown away, and the ground was torn up.

“Darkness Magic: Thousand Darkness Cutter.”

Barbatos’s spell filled the air with blades of pure darkness.

“Anna, barrier.”

“R-Right!”

Frantically, I called upon my sun magic.

“Sun Magic: Holy Barrier!”

A sphere of light—centered on me—snapped into the air. The brightness blinded me for a moment. However, by the time the light was gone, the dark magic had faded away.

Barbatos seemed amused, despite his spell having been nullified. “So

that is the Hero of Light, my natural enemy.” He turned to Erinyes. “You, fallen brat. You’re from up there—do something about the hero.”

“Aww, but I’m *fallen*, so I don’t do well with sun magic. It’s such a draaag.”

They were also just chatting. It was hard to call what they were doing “cooperating.”

Meanwhile, Goliath and Zagan were wary of the Undyne and didn’t close the distance between us.

“Makoto, what do you think?” I asked.

“They’re messing around.”

“So they’re...not taking this fight seriously?”

“Probably not.”

But I’m only barely managing each attack...

“It’s okay, Anna,” Makoto said, calming me down.

“My liege, what next?”

Before I knew it, Dia was waiting next to us. The other Undyne were with her as well.

R-Right...they’re all here.

“Have you simply been fooling around?” Zagan demanded as he looked around at the other demon lords. The menace radiating off of him kicked up a notch. Mana and miasma billowed around him like steam.

“Fine.”

“We’re ending playtime already? What a shame.”

“Lord Zagan has ordered it, so we follow.”

With Zagan’s words as a signal, the area around all five of the demon lords became blanketed with miasma. The ground shook, and a violent wind began to whip around. Flames flickered madly.

They’re serious now...

An earnest attack from all five of them. There was no way I could defend against—

Huh?

Before I could fully form my thoughts, I felt myself bathed in so much sunlight that it was almost *hot*.

Wh-What the...?

“Anna, I’ve gathered light for you. Is that enough?”

Makoto’s expression didn’t even flicker as he pointed up at the sky.

There wasn't a single cloud. There *was*, however, something round and transparent floating above us, and it was gathering light.

This was...an option?

"Anna, pray to your goddess," said Makoto.

"R-Right... Althena, I beseech you—"

"Ah, stop right there."

I stared at him. "Why did you interrupt me?"

"Let's stop all that roundabout praying."

"Huh?"

Suddenly, he grabbed my arm.

Sun Magic: Synchro.

"M-Makoto, what are you doing?"

"Well, we're dead if we lose, so this is how we *should* be praying." His face had lost its expressionless mask—he was grinning again. "Althena, in exchange for our lifespan, please grant us victory."

Huh? I'd never heard of someone praying like this...

You're such a...bothersome child.

Abruptly, I heard a divine voice. Wait. Was that...?

Suddenly, it felt like my body was on fire. That wasn't all—I was glowing with all the colors of the rainbow. B-But...

"Anna, eyes to the front. They're attacking."

"R-Right!"

I still didn't know what exactly was happening, but I readied my sword.

The demon lords gazed at us as we braced for impact.

"It might be impure, but that light is anima."

"That elementalist didn't even hesitate to use sacrificial magic. What is wrong with him?"

Erinyes had seemed relaxed until now, but her face twisted. "Hang on, that's supposed to be against the divine tenets, isn't it?"

"Crush them first!" Zagan roared.

All the demon lords attacked at once. It was like a tsunami from every direction. There was nowhere to run, and the black wall of miasma seemed like it would crush us.

"Dia."

"Right!"

Makoto cast a saint rank spell.

Ice Frontier.

I followed suit, throwing all the power I had into my magic blade.

Magic Sword of Michael.

The sword itself was engulfed in prismatic flame.

I-I did it...

Their attacks were almost upon us.

“*Light Sword of Victory!*” I swung Balamung casually. For a moment, it seemed like there had been an explosion of light, and I almost passed out from my own attack.

I looked around, coughing. Our surroundings as a whole had been neatly flattened.

I was lost for words for a second...but then I jumped in shock.

“Makoto?!”

“That was impressive,” he said.

His clothes were kind of beaten up, but he seemed fine. *Ph-Phew.*

Dia stared at us reproachfully. “Are you two done yet?”

I looked around frantically and saw four demon lords.

“So we only defeated Goliath...” muttered Makoto.

He was right—the giant was no longer visible.

Had...my attack defeated him? There were still four left, though. I was heaving for breath as I readied my sword again.

They didn’t strike. Instead, I heard them talking.

“The hell was that? That’s cheating...” Erinyes protested, flapping her wings to remove the dust.

“So the Hero of Light is already on the level of a demigod,” Valac said, glaring hatefully. “We should have killed her earlier.”

A demigod? Me...?

“You needn’t worry so much. That attack was her best. Her next ought to be weaker,” Barbatos pointed out calmly.

He was right. I tried not to let it show, but my stamina and mana were both at their limits. I glanced at Makoto, and while he still looked calm, I could see the exhaustion on his face. He was probably in a similar state.

What should we do?

“Aww, we dawdled too much and now the dragon lord’s coming.”

Makoto and I both swiftly turned to look.

Flying our way was a black dragon. He was even larger than Zagan.

Every flap of his wings sent out gusts of winds that were like storms in and of themselves.

My eyes widened. “That’s—”

“Astaroth...” Makoto finished for me.

I gulped. King of the Ancient Dragons, Astaroth. He was said to be the strongest among all the nine demon lords—no, among all creatures of the planet. I could tell he was way above our level, even from a distance. He seemed so overwhelming that the other demon lords were little puppies in comparison.

Meanwhile, the demon lords were acting like they’d already won.

“The dragon lord himself...”

“Whew, it’s over now.”

But...this was actually what Makoto wanted. I’d asked him about his plan while we were “fighting” the army. He had said that if Astaroth appeared, I should “leave the rest to him.”

“Makoto?” I called. He turned my way, his eyes gleaming in all colors of the rainbow.

He’d already started. An inarticulate noise ripped its way from my throat.

“Anna, get a little ways away. Also, set up a barrier to protect yourself.”

“Got it...” I answered after a moment.

I’d heard the name of the spell he was about to use. But knowing ahead of time just made it feel even more unbelievable. Was it truly possible?

“Wait!” Erinyes cried out. “What’s he doing?!”

“Hmph, he’s too—”

“That mana is so far refined. Wait, it isn’t mana... Nor is it ether...”

“Impossible... A mortal with pure *anima*?”

So they’d realized. It was too late, though. Makoto used his dagger to nick his skin. Blood ran along the blade, dyeing it red.

“Ira...I ask for a miracle for this foolish human...” he mumbled.

Guh...

I-I couldn’t breathe. A chill ran throughout my body, and my heart seemed to cry out like an alarm bell. It was cold. Even with how glorious the weather was, it felt like I’d freeze to death. The demon lords—particularly Erinyes—had pinched looks on their faces.

Makoto held out his blue arm, which had transformed into an elemental,

and quietly spoke the miracle's name.

“Water Magic (Divine Rank): Cocytus.”



◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

Before we arrived on the demon continent, I spent a little bit of time in Ira's realm.

"Ira...uh, are you okay?"

She'd summoned me to her surreal abode, and around me, the dolls were working busily away.

"Ah...Makoto Takatsuki. My apologies for suddenly bringing you here."

"I don't mind the summoning, but you look really pale."

There were *dark* circles around her eyes as she worked on some paperwork. Piles of empty energy drink bottles were littered around her desk. Was she overworking herself?

"It doesn't matter. You will arrive tomorrow. I have several things to discuss with you. Sit down where you like."

"Right," I replied, taking a seat near her.

"Firstly, we need to talk about the barrier Iblis has over the continent. There is a possibility that my telepathy won't reach you."

"Well, that's a problem," I remarked. It really was. She'd given me a ton of advice, so not being able to hear her was a real issue.

"Oh? You're being awfully agreeable. It isn't like you."

"It isn't? I'm always counting on you."

Her face showed a hint of happiness.

"Hmm, all right then. Still, you don't need to worry. You won't be able to hear me temporarily, but I can send my voice through gaps in the barrier. It might just take a while to adjust things."

Oh! That was great.

I breathed a sigh of relief and she puffed out her chest (however much she had).

Cute.

"So, what else?" I asked.

Her expression turned serious once more. "You remember what happened with Bifrons? Specifically, the divine rank spell that reversed night and day?"

"Of course I do. I was sure we were going to die."

"That spell would be impossible to cast with only the existing strength

of the creatures on this planet. Hence why I mentioned that some divinity must have been lending miracle power. I've been searching for who that was."

"And did you find them?" I asked, leaning forward without realizing it.

She shook her head. "Unfortunately not. I was unable to find the specific god who did it. What I *did* find, however, was that it wasn't one of the Daemons."

I looked questioningly at her. What did that mean?

"However much I looked, I could not find who assisted Bifrons. If it was one of the Daemons, that would be unthinkable. They aren't skilled with *Fate Magic*, and it would be impossible for them to manipulate time without my notice. No, the Daemons were not behind this—it was someone even more skilled with time manipulation than I, and a higher divinity as well."

"A higher divinity..."

I remembered that Ira was the youngest of the Sacred Deities, so there were probably plenty of candidates.

"Sh-Shut up! I'm the youngest, but so what?! And there are others, yes."

"Apologies for my rudeness."

"Well, whatever. The divinities against the Sacred Deities are the Daemons and the Titanea. It wasn't the Daemons, and the only survivor of the Titanea—Noah—is currently sealed away. Which means...it was one of the neutrals."

"The neutrals?" I repeated. There were gods that were neutral to the conflict?

"I thought we had discussed this before. Naya is an outer god. She's a different type of god."

"Naya... So the goddess that Furiae follows?"

According to Furiae, Naya never spoke to her. Apparently, they'd only ever had *one* conversation.

"Right. 'Outer gods' are gods who rule other planets. Normally, we wouldn't interact. Keeping too separate could lead to sudden conflict, though. Therefore, each type of divinity sends one of their own to the others as an envoy. Or, as humans would understand it, as a hostage."

"That all sounds rather harsh."

They treated Naya like that?

“She isn’t exactly treated harshly,” Ira pointed out. “She is considered one of the seven goddesses and has authority. She even has the power to administer the world through priestesses and heroes...though she hasn’t shown any inclination to do that so far.”

“Is she strong?”

“I haven’t spoken much with her, so I don’t know for sure... According to my sister, though, she has a fair amount of power. More than me, at least.”

“On another note, would she help us against the demon lords?”

“No. Or, at least, I can’t think of any reason she would.”

Right. From what I’d heard, she sounded like a particularly mysterious goddess.

“Why doesn’t she have any motivation?” I asked. It would be nice if she could give Furiae plenty of advice. After all, she was in the middle of reestablishing Laphroaig.

“Eir asked once, and apparently, she just said it was boring. What about this is boring?! Who expects work to be fun?! Does she realize how hard I studied for my exams to become a goddess...?”

“Ira, Ira,” I called out as the light began to leave her eyes.

Yeah, she’d definitely been working too hard. She was starting to get unstable.

“Well, now you know,” Ira said briskly. “Still, we don’t know who helped Bifrons.”

I nodded along. “That’s not good.”

“Rest assured, though. You now have the anima I’ve given you. You can only use one divine rank spell, but it should be plenty.”

She was looking assuredly at me...but I couldn’t say that I shared that confidence.

“And I’ll manage that...how?”

“What’s with you? Where have all your guts gone?”

“Well, when I used *Synchro* with you and managed to reverse his spell...I passed out right after...”

Ira had been literally at my side and I’d still only barely survived. We were up against Iblis this time, and while Anna had grown into her role, I still wasn’t entirely confident.

While I was considering that, Ira gave me a blank look. “Speaking of

that, why did you use fate magic?”

“Well, if I hadn’t set it back to daytime, the *Hero of Light* skill would have been useless,” I explained.

That’d been our only option. However, Ira’s response was far from what I’d expected.

“Huh? What are you talking about? You could have just used water magic to kill him.”

“What? No... What are *you* talking about?” There was no way water magic would have worked for that. It was the weakest element.

She shook her head, immediately rejecting my opinion. “I’ll say the same thing again. Obviously, using water magic, it would’ve been a cinch.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why does she let these misunderstandings continue?” Ira sighed. “I know she doesn’t like fighting, so she might not have said anything because of that, but Noah could have told you...”

As I watched Ira mutter to herself with a hand on her chin, I began to doubt my assumptions.

“Ira, water magic is weak, isn’t it?”

The goddess stared at me.

“No. Not at all.”

“Uh...?” I heard the sound of everything I’d learned at the Water Temple falling apart. “B-But when you compare a fireball and a waterball, they’re completely different in terms of destructive strength, right?”

That was one of the reasons water magic was considered weak—its low rank spells were far less powerful than those of the other elements. After all, a waterball couldn’t even defeat a horned rabbit.

She looked sympathetically at me, then beckoned with a single finger, telling me to come closer.

I walked up to the petite goddess.

“Come on—get over here.” She reached out a slender arm to grab my collar and yank me forward. Her face gradually got closer and closer to mine.

Eventually, her forehead clonked against my own.

“I-Ira? What are—”

“Quiet and close your eyes.”

“Uh...”

“Just do it!”

“R-Right.”

Her breath was tickling my face.

R-Relax! Calm Mind 99%!

I closed my eyes and saw a globe hanging in the darkness. It was a blue sphere, mottled with irregular shapes of green. It was almost like...

Earth?

It looked like pictures I’d seen of the globe back in my old world. The continent equivalents were all completely different, though, so it definitely wasn’t *Earth*.

“This is the world where you currently reside.”

“Huh...”

It felt a little late, but I finally knew for a fact that this world was a planet. The land was shaped differently, but it still looked similar. So, why did she want to show me this?

“Now then...”

She backed away from me and the image vanished from my vision. When I opened my eyes, I was met by a beautiful face marred by exhaustion.

“You didn’t need to include that last bit about exhaustion,” she muttered.

“You should rest a while.”

“I’ll nap when we’re done here.”

She let out a long sigh. I quietly waited for what she’d say next.

“Makoto Takatsuki, you are a water elemental, are you not? What dictates the elementals’ strength?”

Even as I tried to work out her angle, I trawled through my memories of learning the basics.

“Well...the number of them present. With water elementals, there are usually more near water, so using magic close to bodies of water makes spells stronger.”

“That’s right. Incidentally, anima would let you control all of the elementals in the world.”

“I...”

The memory of the planet she had only just shown me flitted through my mind. I understood what she was trying to say.

“So, what color is the world?” she asked, her eyes drifting slightly

closed.

The famous quote from a cosmonaut in my old world went through my head: “*The Earth is blue.*”

“Blue,” I said.

“It is. Why?”

“Well...”

Around seventy percent of the Earth was covered in water. From what I’d seen, this planet was pretty similar. A water elemental was stronger with more water elementals, and there were more elementals where there was more water. Since the planet was covered in water, that meant...

“Among the four elementals, water elementals are the strongest,” Ira declared.

“Th-The strongest?!”

“Of course they are. The planet has seas—it’s got a ton of water. Why haven’t you realized that? It’s so basic.”

She let out an exasperated sigh. Still...calling water the *strongest* element was an exaggeration.

“But, wind elementals...” I pointed out. “Surely they’re all over the planet.”

“Well, the wind isn’t always blowing. Also, you wouldn’t know this because you can’t see them, but there aren’t very many around usually. Unless we’re talking about storms and tornadoes, that is.”

“B-But when you think about what makes up the planet as a whole, surely ground elementals—”

“Underground, sure. If you were deep under the surface, then ground elementals would be stronger. Where do *you* fight, though?”

“Aboveground,” I answered after a pause.

“Right. On the planet’s surface. A surface that is covered with water. Aboveground, water elementals are the most common.”

That...made sense?

“Of course, a mere human could never control all the water elementals on the planet. You would need to be a god like Noah to do that. But you have my anima right now.”

I slowly mulled over what she’d said. So, being a water elemental didn’t mean I was weak... I looked vacantly at my blue right hand. Then, Ira poked me in the forehead.

“So, what divine rank water spells do you know of?”

“Well, we learned about *Cocytus*.”

“Ah, the spell Eir used to annihilate the ancients. It’s a strong one.”

“Annihilate?!” I couldn’t help but yell. She said it like it was nothing. Eir did that? She was definitely a scary goddess. Ultimately, I was glad I’d heard about it from Ira, though—this stuff would definitely come in handy later.

“So I can just use that against Iblis, right?” asked.

“If Astaroth appears, use it. As things stand, Anna could quite possibly lose against him.”

“He’s that strong?”

I knew he was the strongest of the demon lords. But he was so strong that The Hero of Light would lose against him?

“Astaroth has much of the dragon gods’ blood in his veins. His existence is anomalous to the world as a whole.”

“D-Dragon gods?” That was another new phrase.

“They were a remote region’s gods. We drove them out in the distant past. Don’t worry about it. We don’t need to defeat Astaroth in this era.”

“He *was* still alive in the future.” Forcing a defeat wasn’t something we needed to do. Avoiding pointless fights was for the best.

“Right. Do your best not to fight any demon lords. Just go straight for Iblis. Then, you just need to use the divine rank spell.”

“Got it, Ira. Thank you.”

“Go well, Makoto Takatsuki.”

“I will.”

With that, I was no longer in her realm.

That dream had happened a few days ago.

◇ Present Time ◇

“*Water Magic (Divine Rank): Cocytus*.”

The world was slowly overwritten with white, as if it were drifting off to sleep.

It was a fantastical sight. However, contrasting the scene—

“Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot! Why did you just jump in between five demon lords?! I shouldn’t have told you about water elementalists being the

strongest!”

—was Ira’s belligerent yelling.

“I know exactly why Noah didn’t explain it all! You get a little confidence and then go barreling headlong into danger!!!”

“I mean, there wasn’t much else I could do,” I replied. “It’s not like I could have abandoned everyone in Labyrinthos. Besides, fighting a million demon soldiers is just how history went originally, isn’t it?”

“If you wanted to follow history, then you should have fought them on the western continent! Fighting them here is getting carried away!”

“Eh, all’s well that ends well. Now, what do we do next?”

“Ah... This is going to be so much work to overwrite.”

Maybe—*though that “maybe” should probably be “certainly”*—Ira’s lack of sleep was my fault.

“U-Um? Makoto? Does that voice...belong to the Goddess of Fate?” Anna asked. She still gripped her sword tightly in both hands, maintaining the barrier.

“You can hear her?”

“I-I can. I don’t know why, but I was suddenly able to.”

“It’s because there is a divine rank spell in progress,” Ira explained.

“The area around him is temporarily closer to other realms. That’s why you can hear me.”

“Huh, that’s convenient.”

“Actually listen to what I say this time.”

“Got it.”

There was a long pause. “Do you *really*?”

“You’re such a kidder. When have I ever *not* listened?”

“It’d be quicker to count the times you *had*!”

“M-Makoto, focus!” Anna yelled.

I turned my gaze to the demon lords looking down at us, focusing on Astaroth.

“You’d better not lose while borrowing my power,” I heard Ira mutter.

“Of course not, Goddess,” I answered plainly. Oddly, despite being surrounded by demon lords, I didn’t feel any fear.

The influence of *Cocytus* was turning the sky, ground, and even the air itself white. Divine rank magic altered the very fabric of the world. Well, “world” was a bit of an exaggeration—this spell was only going to affect

this continent.

It's only barely divine rank...

Borrowing Ira's power or not, I was still just a mortal, so I couldn't perfectly replicate a miracle of the gods. Humans and gods were on different levels, to begin with, so there was an impassable gulf between us.

With that said, *Cocytus* was enough to defeat the demon lords.

"Can you move, Anna?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'll manage," came a pained response.

That was the Hero of Light for you. She wasn't cheating like me—she was legitimately on the level of this pseudo-divine rank spell.

In contrast, the demon lords—other than Astaroth—weren't even able to move due to the spell.

Well, *shouldn't* have been able to move, that is.

"This feels awful."

That languid voice belonged to Erinyes. She was flapping her black wings and her expression as she looked down at us had returned to one of nonchalance.

"Eri used to be an archangel in the divine realm, so she's resistant to our magic. Be careful."

"Right..."

Ira's comment made sense. That was annoying. Now we had to deal with both Astaroth *and* her. Could we do it?

Then, Erinyes spoke up.

"That voice... Is that Irrie, the goddess apprentice? What are you doing? Do you know how much your scary sisters will scold you for interfering?"

Huh, they knew each other?

"What?! Who are you calling apprentice?! I'm the Goddess of Fate!"

"Irrie? You went into *fate* of all things? That's practically hell. Are you okay? Are you coping?"

"Sh-Shut up! I'm doing great! I'm capable!"

"You kept screwing up the little things while you were an apprentice, though."

"It just happened sometimes!"

"You had to do the most punishment lines out of any of the apprentices..."

"Shut your mouth. I'll throw you in Tartarus."

“Aww, you used to be so cute and now you’re a scary goddess.”

The gravity of the situation had shattered into a million pieces. Behind me, Anna seemed lost.

“U-Um, they know each other?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Looks that way.”

A goddess and demon lord knew each other personally... What was the world coming to?

“I was one of the apprentices’ teachers back in the heavenly realm,” said Erinyes. “Man, that takes me back. Little Irrie went from all those screwups to becoming the Goddess of Fate...”

“Silence, you fallen angel!” snapped Ira. “Don’t you feel any shame about being a demon lord?!”

“It’s actually pretty fun. No quotas, and I can just laze around all day.”

So the heavenly realm was full of quotas. How disillusioning.

“Besides,” Erinyes continued. “I bet you’re taking on everything personally and losing sleep.”

“That’s right,” I interjected. “She works too much and I’m worried about her.”

“Makoto Takatsuki?! That’s too far!”

Ouch. I was just showing that I cared, and Ira flew off the handle at me. That’s not fair.

“Irrie, why don’t you fall too?” asked Erinyes. “It’s great.”

“Enough! Makoto Takatsuki, beat her into the ground!” Ira demanded, apparently realizing she wouldn’t win the battle of wits.

That was easier said than done since I had my hands full controlling the spell. The only option we had was for me to hinder them and allow Anna to attack.

She and I exchanged glances, considering our strategy.

“How long are you planning to flap your gums?” came an overwhelming voice from the sky.

I looked up to see a huge figure staring down at us. He was the strongest demon lord, carrying the blood of the dragon gods—Astaroth.

“My friend Bifrons is no more, and even Goliath failed...”

There was a hint of fondness in his voice. I thought the demon lords weren’t really close?

“But don’t assume you will have an easy death, heroes.”

“Guh!” Just his glare alone was enough to make Anna grunt.

“Sir Astaroth, surely you can’t be aiming to fight this *Cocytus* caster directly?” Erinyes asked, perching on his shoulder.

He glared at her. “And you would suggest otherwise?”

She shrugged. “As far as I can see, he can only use it once. It’s taking his lifespan to maintain as well. Perhaps withdrawing temporarily would be better.”

“Hmm...”

He turned to look at us. That was a demon lord, all right—disgustingly calm. He was right though. I could only use a divine rank spell once, so we had to beat them *now*.

“You think you’re getting out?” I asked.

I had already cast the spell, and they were all within it. The spell included a barrier. It was a jail—you could neither enter nor leave it, and the caster was also the jailer. It took the freedom of those within the spell and stole their power, making it impossible to stand against the jailer. The worst part was that it caused constant pain for everyone inside it. After all, it *was* meant to punish sinners.

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), I could only barely cast it, so I couldn’t really inflict suffering. The spell was still effective, though.

Demon lords or not, Barbatos, Valac, and Zagan couldn’t even open their mouths. Their reactions were varied—eyes open wide and shaking in fear, falling to the ground, or just standing dazed.

This was...Eir’s spell, right? It was a scary one. Or more accurately, *she* was a scary one.

“Well, she said, ‘It’s kind since it doesn’t just kill them outright! ☆’”

“Ah...I see.”

I could easily imagine her smiling as she said that.

“That blackhearted goddess’s spell...” murmured Erinyes. “It’s annoying, but fortunately, isn’t particularly lethal. Still, staying in here steals your power. I’m only around a quarter as strong as usual.” She remained calm, and black figures gathered in the air around her. Darkness magic? I didn’t fancy getting caught by them.

“I would say I am at about half strength,” Astaroth remarked, his miasma production skyrocketing. If it wasn’t for my spell, that miasma would have already engulfed and defeated us. This was half his strength,

and he still had more mana than the five had used earlier while fighting... There was too much of a difference between them.

Was there anyone who could beat him fairly? The one thing I could think of was...

“Althena...I pay this price,” whispered someone behind me. “Please lend me strength.”

A rainbow of light engulfed us, pushing back the miasma. Anna looked pale.

“That was sacrificial magic, wasn’t it?”

“I was copying you... After all, we’re dead if we lose here.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

We turned to face the two demon lords. I didn’t want this to drag on for too long. Nor did they.

“Sir Astaroth, could I ask you for the opener?” I requested.

“Very well,” he responded.

I didn’t even begin to wonder what he was doing—it was obvious. A low rumble in his throat was joined by a huge mass of mana accumulating at his mouth.

Dragon Roar.

It was exactly what it sounded like, and coming from *Astaroth*, it would likely blast away the whole mountain. To face that, we’d need...

Magic Sword of Michael.

The area around Anna was covered in white flames, and she shone in prismatic light. Even more mana was coming from her now.

“Makoto, get behind me.”

“Got it.” I kept up the spell as I fell back.

Both sides were using their strongest techniques.

The ground began to shake and split; gusts of wind whipped through the area. It looked like the world was ending. The miasma gathering around Astaroth seemed like a black moon, while the area around Anna was gleaming like a white sun. Which would win?

Anna won’t lose...

After all, the Hero of Light was the savior, and that power was absolute. Right, Ira?

“O-Of course...”

Her voice was shaking. It was pretty close to the wire, wasn’t it?

All I could do was pray—to Noah, Eir, and Ira.

Astaroth's mouth opened, ready to unleash the roar, and Anna moved to slash her sword.

"Let's stop it there, everyone," came a tranquil voice.

The black miasma and white light both faded away to nothingness.

Tension, so thick you could have cut it, suddenly snapped.

Anna's expression went blank. Even Astaroth's calmed.

Only Erinyes had a look of unhappiness on her face.

"Anna?"

"Makoto...what was I...?"

She looked half asleep for a second but then snapped back to seriousness.

I'd seen that expression before, but it was impossible. It might have only been for a second...but she'd been charmed. The Hero of Light was untouchable to all curses, a perfect nullification of them.

So how...?

I looked for whoever had spoken and soon found them. With a flapping of wings, a huge creature came down between us and the demon lords.

It looked like a dragon at a glance, but it had three mouths, five arms, and seven wings, along with countless eyes all over its body. It was a foul-looking creature.

"That dragon..." Anna murmured.

"Is a blight dragon," I finished.

Blight monsters—those with profane forms—were beasts created by Iblis. It was hardly strange for one to appear on the demon continent. The thing that bothered me more was its rider. She had long glossy hair, and her figure was visible through the dress she was wearing.

She was so beautiful that even looking at her would charm people. Also, she was very similar in looks to Furiae.

Similar, but not the same person. This was the second time we'd met, and I knew her name.

Queen Nevia of Laphroaig smiled from atop the blight dragon.

"It's been a while, Hero."

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Reunites with the Witch of Calamity

This was Queen Nevia of Laphroaig. No one called her by that name a thousand years from now.

The Witch of Calamity—that was her alias. She was a traitor to humanity and a priestess of curses. Those feelings about her, all of them negative, were all that remained in the future. And yet, this woman was here grinning innocently at me.

“Why have you stopped us, Lady Nevia? It was Great Iblis’s order that the Hero of Light’s party was to be killed,” said Astaroth in his deep, booming voice.

“Allowing *Cocytus* to persist will see the citizens of the northern continent perish. Also, if you continue your battle here, the spell will catch the immobilized demon lords, will it not?”

The queen’s words prompted me to glance around. She was right—Barbatos, Valac, and Zagan had all been quelled by the divine rank spell.

There was something strange about this, though.

Why’s she moving?

Erinyes could move because she’d once been an angel in the heavenly realm. Astaroth was mobile because he had the blood of the dragon gods in his veins.

Priestess or not, she should be human. Even the demon lords couldn’t move within *Cocytus*, so how was she prancing around?

After a pause, Anna yelled out, “Whose side are you on? You’re the queen of Laphroaig, aren’t you?!”

From her perspective, seeing the monarch speaking amicably to the demon lords was a shock.

“I am on everyone’s side.” Queen Nevia smiled. “Naturally, that includes you.”

She’s got some nerve...

No, she was definitely on the demons' side. History considered her to be evil, just like the demon lords.

Still, she didn't show a sign of malice.

Anna kept looking at her suspiciously. Balamung stayed at the ready. She hadn't accepted the queen's words at face value.

"Nevia, it's pointless. Your precious *Charm* won't work on them," Erinyes said.

"Well, I *had* wanted to settle this peacefully..."

Erinyes took flight and hovered next to Queen Nevia. Looking more closely, I could see that the queen's eyes were glowing gold. So she *had* been intending to charm us. What was peaceful about *that*?!

I felt uneasy, and I glanced over at Anna's face...

We were fine. She wasn't charmed. I'd just been imagining the momentary charm earlier. *I must have been.*

Queen Nevia gave a small sigh, then approached us. "I suppose I'll just have to ask."

Her aura didn't feel threatening at all. Compared to the other two demon lords, she seemed harmless. Still, Anna and I took several steps back as she approached.

"Sir hero, can I ask you to cease this *Cocytus*?" she asked me, maintaining her smile.

"You mustn't, Makoto Takatsuki," warned Ira.

"I know."

It wasn't like she had to tell me that. *Cocytus* was my lifeline. The moment I stopped it, the demon lords would kill me.

"Gallant hero, Makoto Takatsuki," Queen Nevia called out. Her voice was sweet, and it almost seemed like she'd whispered directly into my ear.

"What?" I asked.

"On your way here, you came across a village of poor demons, did you not?"

I was silent for a moment. *So she was watching us.*

"What of it?"

"If *Cocytus* reaches completion, those innocent children will die," she proclaimed. "Not just that—this spell is *divine* magic, something that can cause even more pain than death. Surely that is excessively cruel, would you not agree? Hero, are you someone who can carry out such brutality?"

Her voice wasn't critical—she just gently asked the question.

She was also correct. Divine magic affected a huge range. And since I was human, I couldn't entirely control it. It would eventually engulf everyone on the continent. She'd given me a painful reminder.

"It's because you made us suffer! Without any reason!" Anna cried out.

"Yet newborn children and demon-human couples exist on this continent in great numbers. Many of them live out their whole lives here in peace, never leaving this place. You demand all of their deaths? Is that your desire, Hero?"

"It's not the same!" Anna insisted, refusing the retreat. Her voice was weaker, though. I stepped out in front of her.

"You're supposed to be negotiating with me," I cut in. "But no matter what you say, I'm not stopping the spell."

In honesty, indiscriminately killing everyone on the continent hurt me quite a bit... If I hadn't possessed *Calm Mind*, I might not have been able to cope. Still, there was no way I was stopping the spell.

Queen Nevia seemed to have expected that. Her smile did not falter.

"Hero, your aim is Lord Iblis's life, is it not?"

"Nevia? What are you doing?" Erinyes demanded with a suspicious look. I was trying to divine her intentions as well.

"Well, gallant hero, you *will* be able to meet our great lord."

People on both sides gasped in shock. I just quietly watched her, though. Her smile was unchanging, unreadable.

"It's a trap, right?" I asked.

She chuckled in response. "Who can say? Still, such opportunities are few and far between."

She didn't actually refute my statement.

"Makoto Takatsuki," Ira said. "You mustn't be deceived."

I nodded. I couldn't just take the queen at her word.

"Naturally, I realize that this offer alone does not amount to real negotiations," continued Queen Nevia. "I therefore have a gift for you all."

She offered up a prayer to the heavens.

My great master, I beseech thee for a fleeting night.

She...wasn't praying to Naya?

I didn't have the time to actually think that through—her words triggered something completely absurd. The light of the sun went out and

we were engulfed in darkness. Then, the moon and a blanket of stars appeared in the sky.

“What the...?”

I jolted. Ira frantically tried to figure out what had happened.

“Anna!” I yelled. I saw that she had paled significantly.

The source of her power was sunlight. And since it was now nighttime, her strength had been cut in half!

“Worry not,” said Queen Nevia. “This night is for but a moment.” She still showed no sign of coming to attack us.

I speak to all of you living on this continent, her voice echoed. *The Hero of Light and her companions are not to be harmed.*

Despite the lack of volume in the queen’s voice, it seemed to travel everywhere.

Breaking this pact will bring death upon you.

And with that decidedly unsettling comment, she was finished. The area brightened as the sunlight returned.

“What do you say, Hero?”

“Well, you just...” I trailed off. They’d just been words, after all.

I quickly looked into Erinyes’s eyes.

“What are you playing at, Nevia?” she demanded. “You’ve even cursed *us*.”

That was right—the queen’s words *were* a curse.

“I had no choice. If I hadn’t done so, the hero would’ve kept his spell going.”

She’d really bound the entirety of the continent...? But surely that was the realm of divine magic.

When she noticed my suspicious look, she giggled. “The citizens here are usually charmed, so it was simple,” she remarked nonchalantly.

Furiae had once told me about *Charm* being a type of curse. So was Queen Nevia telling the truth?

“She’s right—no doubt about it,” Ira added. “All citizens of the continent have been cursed to die if they activate the condition. That is, if they cause Anna or her comrades any harm.”

The goddess’s words wiped away any chance that Queen Nevia was lying.

“But she could just release it, so surely she can break the agreement...”

Anna pointed out.

“Releasing a curse is far harder than laying one. It would likely take several days,” Ira refuted.

So the citizens *truly* couldn’t attack us? *Then we can just keep up on the offensive.*

That thought had no sooner passed through my head than Ira spoke up.

“Makoto Takatsuki... That would be...”

“I was kidding, Ira.” Massacring the defenseless wasn’t going to be acceptable.

Queen Nevia’s smile never slipped. There was a vague sense of something terrifying behind that grin.

Well, there is actually a benefit to stopping the spell...

If I didn’t let it go to completion, there would still be anima left in my body. In other words, I could cast it again—albeit on a smaller scale.

Our ultimate goal was to reach Iblis. The fighting forces of the continent couldn’t attack us due to the curse. Iblis himself was apparently willing to meet us. Having anima left on top of that really made it feel like this wasn’t a trap.

“Makoto...” Anna said uneasily, tugging at my sleeve. Her face looked drawn, and I wanted to let her rest.

“I’ll halt *Cocytus*,” I said eventually.

The strength slipped from my body as the spell ceased. I felt on the verge of collapse, but I managed to remain upright. The whitened world was gradually regaining its color.

“Thank you, Hero,” the queen said. She seemed to understand that I had kept my word.

“Well that’s just ruined everything,” Erinyes complained. “I came rushing here from the southern continent and now I’m cursed and unable to even attack the Hero of Light. I’m heading back.”

Erinyes unfurled her wings and flew off into the sky.

Astaroth just quietly looked down at us. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but he didn’t seem like he was going to attack. We had a temporary ceasefire, it seemed.

I sighed in relief.

“Oh, so Eri’s gone.”

“Gah!” I yelled as I felt immense pressure on my neck. I was quickly

hoisted up into the air. My consciousness was fading, but I managed to discern that it was Barbatos who had me by the throat.

“Makoto!” Anna yelled.

“Don’t move, Hero of Light,” another voice croaked. That was Valac—he stood in front of Anna.

So they were back? C’mon, they weren’t abiding by the condition—

“I’m killing him,” Barbatos declared. “That’s fine, right, Lady Nevia?”

“Ah... You mustn’t.”

Barbatos’s claws were pressing into my neck.

Ack... Passing out...

I was fading fast and nearly unconscious.

“Sir Makoto!” Johnnie and Momo shouted in unison as they clung to me.

Huh? I was free?

“These two insisted on returning. Elementalist, that was close.”

Even Mel had arrived. *But wait, what about Barbatos?!*

“Oh... You used a *Teleport* to strike me. I may have just taken a divine rank spell, but I was careless just now.” Barbatos was swaying where he stood, apparently wounded.

I looked closer and saw that the arm he’d been using to hold me up had been lopped off. Johnnie’s sword was unsheathed—he must have done it.

“Lady Nevia... That curse is...well rooted...”

Blood was flowing from Barbatos’s mouth as he glared at the queen.

“I told you not to,” she retorted with a sigh.

“Um...I nearly died there.” I glared reproachfully at Queen Nevia.

“My apologies. And Barbatos’s as well,” she said lightly.

I crossed my arms. “Well, I expect you to keep up your end of the agreement. I want to see Iblis.”

“Of course. I shall escort you presently.”

Having tried to kill me, it seemed like Barbatos was on the verge of death from the curse’s effects. Queen Nevia was the only one still at ease. The other demon lords were glaring at her, detest radiating from their eyes. However, none of them moved to attack. One after another, they vanished.

Finally, a handsome man approached—Barbatos.

“Ah, sorry ’bout that, Hero. You nearly died,” he said casually. The arm had already regenerated, but he still looked unwell because of the curse.

“That curse seems to be taking its toll on you too,” I retorted.

“More than a little. I have four lives, so I thought I could sacrifice one to get you. The curse was worse than I thought, though. I might have lost all four if I’d actually gone through with it. I should be thanking you for saving me.” He chuckled. “I’ll be taking my leave... Can you humans maintain your sanity facing the Great One?”

At that, he teleported away.

Valac and Zagan had already gone. The only one left was...

“Helemmelk.”

Astaroth had remained until last. He spoke Mel’s name. Simply hearing him speak was overwhelming.

Mel’s expression was awkward as she looked away.

“I have business with you. Find me later.”

With those parting words, he left. Mel looked much better with him gone. Was she okay...?

Either way, all of the demon lords had departed.

The only people still here were Anna, Johnnie, Momo, Mel, and Queen Nevia. Though, black-armored dragon knights were gathering around us as well. They were presumably able to move again now that my spell was gone. They had pursued us before, but this time, none of them showed any sign of hostility.

“Lord Iblis will meet you tomorrow. Please rest within our city until then.”

““Our city”?” I repeated. I thought the only city she could claim governance of was...

“We’re going back to Laphroaig?”

“No, to the capital of this continent—the city the Great One rules.”

“That’s...?”

She didn’t clarify. “Follow me.” She remounted the blight dragon and flew off, ignoring our confusion.

We quickly got onto Mel’s back and followed. After soaring through the gray skies for a while, we eventually saw a wide-open area.

“We have arrived,” Queen Nevia spoke.

“Wah...”

I could hear Momo marveling. Johnnie and Anna were both dumbfounded.

The capital of the demon continent. In this era, it was the seat of Iblis's power. I'd imagined a massive city, but this...

Buildings seemed to continue on endlessly. The sheer height of them made me think it was a slice of Tokyo. It was a far more developed city than even Highland's capital.

Queen Nevia guided us to a fancy-looking hotel.

"Please, rest well. I shall come for you tomorrow," she said before departing.

This was the capital of the demon continent, Lees. It was home to countless demons and the infrastructure spread as far as the eye could see.

The most noticeable thing about Lees was that it had no outer walls.

A thousand years from now, all towns had walls—Laphroaig's capital had them right now. However, this city did not. That meant they did not fear an external attack.

We were led to a hotel suite by some polite demons. The space was filled with fine furnishings, and it was private—no one but us was using any of these rooms. We practically had the run of the place. We were wary of an attack for a while, but absolutely nothing happened, so gradually, we relaxed.

We can't just wait, though. That would be a waste of time.

"What are we doing tomorrow?" I asked everyone.

Nevia was bringing us to meet Iblis. It was almost certainly a trap.

"We should escape!" Momo said, providing the obvious option. Leaving the continent would be the safest option.

"But surely this is our chance to defeat Iblis?" Johnnie stated. "We can retreat at any time."

His view was entirely understandable as well. After all, our aim was to slay Iblis. This was our ultimate goal, and it was now right before our eyes. Could we really let this chance slip through our fingers?

"What in the world are they aiming for?" Anna asked, looking at me uneasily. "They wanted...to kill me, right?"

She was right—before Queen Nevia had arrived, the demon lords had been persistently pursuing Anna under orders to kill the Hero of Light.

"You do not need to consider the Great Demon Lord's reasoning so deeply. I believe he will offer an invitation." Mel said this as if it were obvious.

“An invitation? To what?” I asked.

Mel carried on in the same tone. “An invitation for the one who defeated Bifrons, ruler of the western continent. The Great Demon Lord will ask if that person wants to take his place.”

“I would never do that!” Anna exclaimed.

“Not what I mean, Hero,” Mel said, waving off Anna’s indignation.

“Huh?”

Then, Mel pointed directly at me. “Elementalist, I believe he will ask *you* if you wish to take Bifrons’s place.”

Her eyes were fixed on my own.

Me?

“Why?” I asked. “Anna was the one who defeated him.”

“But you are the one who made it possible. Additionally, you used a divine rank spell. Iblis has made this offer on many occasions in the past. The latest would be that dark knight of his.”

I heard a grinding of teeth. *Ah, that would be Cain—an apostle of Noah just like me and the killer of Anna’s mentor. Right, he’s a newbie demon lord.*

“C’mon, Teacher Mel! Sir Makoto wouldn’t do something like that...”

“If the elementalist rules the continent as a demon lord, then he could bring peace. The people of Labyrinthos would be able to live safely as well.”

“B-But...”

Momo’s eyes were wide. She fell silent.

“That...could be quite a good suggestion.”

“Johnnie?!” Anna exclaimed in disbelief, glaring at the long-haired elf.

“Assume that Sir Makoto accepts and Iblis lets his guard down around his new ally. That could work to our advantage—we might even defeat him. What do you think, Sir Makoto?”

“Lulling him into a false sense of security...” I muttered.

Johnnie shrugged. “A common tactic, no?”

“You’re not the nicest of people, huh?” I snorted.

It was...a surprisingly good suggestion. Well, good except for the fact that Anna was glaring at us from behind.

I turned to the so-far silent goddess who’d been watching over all of this. “Ira, what do you think?”

The other three surely couldn't have heard her, but they all fell silent as well.

I cannot see the threads of fate around Iblis. He has a defense against my sight...

So she wasn't sure. Well, I'd heard the same before.

Johnnie's right, though—it could be a chance. You would still have my anima, so you could escape if necessary.

Right. I'd only *half* activated that spell earlier. Since I'd cut it off partway through, I still had a small amount of anima left.

"Can we not defeat him outright?" I asked.

It would be nice if you could...but he likely knows that you have my anima. I'm sure he's taken precautions.

"That's concerning."

Rather, yes, she replied with an exhausted sigh.

"So, are you *for* meeting him, or *against*?" I asked.

Silence.

"Ira?"

I believe this is a significant opportunity... You could defeat him.

That was a considerably less certain reply than usual. Something must've been worrying her.

"Elementalist, what did she say?" Mel had apparently gotten tired of me muttering to myself, so she demanded answers.

"She thinks it's a worthwhile chance, so it could be a good idea," I answered. "If it comes to it, I can use the anima to get us out of there."

"I see," Johnnie replied, his tone neutral.

Momo whimpered. "It's scary..."

"Let us follow the goddess's instructions," said Mel.

After everyone else had spoken, Anna grabbed my arm. "Makoto," she said, her face the gravest out of any of us.

"What is it?"

"You won't become a demon lord, will you?"

"Huh?"

Her expression was so serious that I'd wondered what she might ask. I was sure that if I'd been looking in a mirror, I would've seen my reflection gaping like a goldfish.

"Of course I won't," I replied. Heartfelt relief spread across her face.

“You won’t? That’s a shame,” Johnnie remarked.

So apparently he *had* wanted me to go through with it. If the only goal was to bring peace to the continent without fighting, I would’ve certainly agreed. But...

“I’m a human. Even if I did accept, I’d bring a hundred years of peace at best. What would they do about the demon lord of the continent *then*?”

“Bifrons is not completely destroyed,” Mel explained. “The Hero of Light’s attack simply took away the majority of his power, so he will be able to resurrect in a millennium. I would wager that the Great Demon Lord wishes to make you into an interim demon lord.”

Anna had thought she’d defeated Bifrons, but according to Mel, he’d be back. I’d actually seen that happen with my own two eyes.

“So the final battle with Iblis is tomorrow. That’s okay, right?”

I looked at everyone in turn and they all nodded back to me.

“Hm... So our course is decided.” Johnnie hung his blade at his waist and swung his cloak over his shoulders.

“Where are you going?” Momo asked.

“Well, it’s the first time I’ve been here, so there should be plenty to see.”

“A-Are you serious?!”

“It’s a city of demons!”

Momo and Anna were both shocked.

“Sir Makoto, the demons of the city are all beholden to the queen of Laphroaig’s curse—this prevents them from attacking us, no?”

I’m sure of it! Ira chirped in my head.

“Yep. Ira says so.”

“Then it should be no concern.”

With that, Johnnie left the room. He sure had guts... Neither Anna nor Momo seemed interested in going out. Instead, they sat down on the beds and looked out of the windows.

I’ll get bored just waiting around, though...

I considered training, but then Mel walked up to me with an awkward look.

“Say, Elementalist, do you have some free time?”

“As you can see, I’ve got more time than I know what to do with.”

All we had left to do was wait until tomorrow.

“There’s somewhere I want you to accompany me.”

“I don’t mind. Where?”

Mel had been indispensable. I wasn’t just going to turn her down. I was still wondering where in the world we were going.

Anna perked up. “I’ll come too!”

“Me too!” Momo insisted.

Mel shook her head. “It is somewhat dangerous— No, not exactly dangerous, but I cannot take the two of you with us... My apologies, but I would like to borrow the elemental for a while.”

“Very well,” Anna replied eventually.

“Aww, we have to stay hereeee?”

Anna’s unhappiness was just peeking through, but Momo’s was plain to see.

Personally, I was most caught up on the fact that the first adjective she’d gone for was “dangerous.” Seriously, where was she taking me?

And so, we left Anna and Momo behind and headed out.

“So...we’re walking?” I asked.

“Well, it is close to the hotel.”

I’d been expecting to fly to wherever we were going, but apparently not. We strolled at a relaxed pace through the city, passing by a veritable parade of demons. There were plenty of stores along the street, and business seemed to be booming. It was an active place, but something was still bothering me.

“Everyone’s charmed,” I observed.

Mel nodded. “None of the inhabitants seem bothered.”

Was it all due to Queen Nevia’s abilities? If so, that was kind of absurd.

“There are so many people...” Mel murmured.

“There are.”

“Even more people than buildings. I wonder if they all live in the city.”

There were many houses, but the city seemed too populated for even that.

“Maybe they commute,” I suggested.

“Perhaps. Also...there are many ghosts and undead.”

“There are.”

A fair portion of the passing demons were transparent ghosts, zombies, or skeletons. None of them were armed, and all seemed fairly at ease being

in close proximity to the crowd.

Some of the stores and stalls called out to us, but we didn't stop.

After a while of walking, Mel stopped in front of a huge estate. It seemed even bigger than the castle in Highland. I could only assume that someone important or influential lived here. The size of the gate was similarly absurd. At the very least, it seemed too big for a human to open.

The reason for that soon made itself quite clear.

"Welcome."

The voice came from a dragon who addressed Mel and then opened the gate. *The lord of the manor is probably also a dragon.* Well, that made sense, given the size of everything.

"Let's go, Elementalist."

"R-Right." I glanced at the dragon guard, who was looking rather fixedly at me. "Um... Mel, could you tell me why we're here already?"

"To see Astaroth," she said.

Well, considering who the guard was, I guess I'd sort of expected that.

"Uh, so...why are we coming to see the strongest demon lord?" I asked.

"He told me to. I'm sure you heard."

"I did... But why am *I* with you?"

"The reason I am assisting you is due to my loss in Labyrinthos—you defeated me on my own territory. Ancient dragons follow the strong. Explaining that will be easiest with you present."

"But this is a *demon lord* we're talking about," I pointed out. "Is it really going to end with just talking?"

"He is an acquaintance of mine. Additionally, he should be unable to attack due to Queen Nevia's curse."

Mel was an ancient dragon, so there was indeed some connection between the two of them. I knew that, but...

"Astaroth has the blood of the dragon gods, so isn't it possible that the curse won't affect him?"

"I'm impressed you know about that."

"Ira told me."

"Worry not—it will be fine. Let us go. I do not feel like progressing alone."

Ah. So essentially, she was scared and didn't want to go on her own.

I paused for a moment and then agreed. "Fine."

Honestly, I really wanted to head back, but didn't think I'd be able to. Massive doors large enough to permit even giants to pass opened up before us. Mel strode rapidly forward. I followed behind her with much less certainty, looking around as I did.

There was a heavy thud as the door closed behind us.

Well, now I really can't head back.

"What's wrong, Elementalist?"

"I'm scared," I told her frankly.

"Hah." Amusement glittered in her eyes. "So there are things even you fear."

What exactly did she think of me? Well, I'd come this far, so it was time to see it through. I set *Calm Mind* to 99%, and...

With more surety, we headed up the main stairs. Directly at the top, we passed through another door into a hall. Facing us was...a throne.

A man clad in black sat atop it. He seemed to be over three meters tall. He wasn't as big as a giant, but it was also obvious that he wasn't human.

He looked down at us with a sharp gleam in his eyes.

"That's..."

"Astaroth," Mel answered my whisper.

He may have looked different. But the miasma coming off of him proved he was the same demon lord that had been menacing us earlier. Like Mel, he had taken on a human form.

The path up to the throne was covered by a bloodred carpet. We walked along it, huge warriors flanking us on either side. The glimpses of their skin that we could see were decorated in scalelike patterns, so they were probably dragons as well.

We arrived within a few meters of Astaroth. For a while, silence reigned.

Mel, say something! I "said" with a look.

She seemed even more nervous than I'd anticipated. Her expression was tight.

Astaroth was the first to open his mouth.

"Welcome, my daughter."

Mel was silent for several moments.

"It has been a while, father," she answered reluctantly.

Ira had told me about this before, so I already knew their connection. That didn't change my feelings though. It was honestly shocking—a thousand years from now, she would be known as the holy dragon who'd joined Abel's party.

◇ Astaroth's Perspective ◇

It had been a few hundred years since I'd seen my daughter.

I had been all but sure that she would arrive alone, but there was a human man at her side. At a glance, he looked like a weakling with a pittance of mana. The army already knew of him, though.

This was the first master of the Undyne in over a dozen millennia. There had never been a human elemental of his ilk before.

Initially, we had assumed that the Hero of Light the Great One had informed us of was the main person to watch. Now, though, we knew of someone more dangerous. There was no way we could ignore an individual capable of divine rank magic.

Why, of all people, had she brought him?

"A while indeed, my daughter."

My voice boomed through the room. It had been a considerable span of time since we'd last met. Unhappy with my decision to serve the Great One, she had vanished from my side long ago.

I had never expected that our reunion would take such a form.

"You seem in good health," she replied.

She had a rather sulky attitude at the moment. I'd thought she might have calmed down by now, but she was apparently still rather immature.

The man next to her simply looked around curiously.

What is he thinking...?

He was standing in front of a demon lord, in said demon lord's castle—he could have at least had the decency to look ill at ease. But nothing seemed to move him.

He turned his gaze my way.

I suppressed my irritation and turned my attention to my daughter. "Why are you an ally of this human?"

"For the same reason as you ally with *him*. I am simply following the strong."

I paused. “So the man at your side has taken you in,” I said harshly.

“It is the ancient dragons’ pride to respect strength, is it not?”

I raised my voice. “And tomorrow, the Great One will be here. At that point, it will all be over.” Indeed, no one could stand up to him.

“You cannot be certain of that,” she argued. “Even *you* were cowed today.”

“Equating us and him is...folly.”

“When did you lose your spine?”

No good. She had blind faith in the elementalist. My words would not reach her. I had no other choice but to ask the man.

I faced him. “What is your name?”

This was the first time I’d ever inquired after a human’s name. But all he did was look blankly back at me. My daughter answered for him instead.

“Father, he is Makoto Takatsuki.”

Why are you speaking in his stead?

Instead of voicing that, I addressed the man once more. “Makoto Takatsuki. You were the one to defeat my friend.”

I couldn’t help it—my voice grew harsh. I had known Bifrons for a long time. Apparently, he was not completely gone...but it was unthinkable that a *human* could defeat him.

“I was lucky,” he said simply.

“Hmm.”

Lucky. That would not have been enough to defeat Bifrons. The man was mocking me.

I stood from my throne, slowly approaching this Makoto Takatsuki. He showed some fear, but he neither moved to run nor hide. Nevia’s curse meant that I could not attack him anyway.

Oddly, there was still an air of calm about him too, despite the fact that he was standing in a demon lord’s castle. He was surrounded by veteran ancient dragons and standing in front of *me*. What nerves did he possess? Perhaps he was simply confident after launching a divine rank spell.

“You have anima dwelling within your body. But even that will not help you against the Great One.”

Our leader was on another level—he was so far above us demon lords. If this man assumed that such a half-hearted spell would defeat the Great One, he would be sorely mistaken.

“I won’t know until I try,” said Makoto Takatsuki.

“Pointless. Cease your foolishness. Just submit.”

“Father, it is pointless. The elemental is one of the goddesses in heaven’s apostles. You can’t stop him.”

A goddess’s apostle. That was irritating. As soon as they saw their gods, they were lost. The black knight who believed in that wicked deity was the same.

All of them fell without exception. A conversation was impossible.

No... My daughter will earn His enmity.

There had to be some way around that. Perhaps I could ignore the curse and force the matter.

The man seemed to understand my thoughts because he soon spoke.

“Astaroth, you need not worry. If we can’t manage to defeat Iblis, we’ll just escape.”

“What...?”

I was taken aback by his words. Had he not just skated through the jaws of death, surrounded by demon lords, solely to challenge the Great One? Why would he so easily suggest fleeing?

“You think you can escape while in his sight?!”

An enraged yell thundered out of my mouth. Even *I* had realized with a glance that surrender to the Great One was my only option. That was the level of being *He* was. The fear I had felt back then welled up within me once more. Without intending it, miasma overflowed from my body, putting pressure on them.

My subordinates all cowered back.

Ack, I should not have been so intense with a human.

Regretfully, I looked back at the elemental.

“Well, we’re meeting with him. It’d be rude to not at least say hello,” he said easily.

The look in his eyes was not that of a broken man.

He... How can he look like that in front of me?

I understood how my daughter was taken in. Vexing as it was. With the courage this man had, I wanted to battle him.

“Do not assume you will survive spurning my lord. Still, if you *do* survive, once the priestess’s curse is lifted, challenge me. If you win, I shall grant you the title of dragon lord. All dragons will then obey your

command.”

“Father...are you serious?”

“Dragon lord?”

Both of them looked rather shocked.

“This man brought down my old friend, and took my daughter. On my pride as an ancient dragon, I seek to fight him.”

Before I knew it, my irritation had faded. Now all I had to do was await his reply.

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.....

Faint shapes, almost looking like letters formed near the elemental. And yet I could not perceive them. It was a strange feeling.

“Very well, I promise. I’ll challenge you someday,” he readily agreed. My subordinates stirred.

Intriguing. This man would doubtless appear before me again. I was sure of it.

In good humor, I told my subordinates to see the man out. My daughter moved to follow, but I called her to stop. We hadn’t gotten much time to speak, so I asked her about her recent travels.

◇ Anna’s Perspective ◇

Makoto is taking his time...

Momo and I were waiting for him to get back, but he hadn’t shown any sign of returning.

“T-Teacher Mel can’t be after him as well, can she?!”

“Nah, there’s no way,” I answered with a laugh.

“She might be! Recently, she’s had the same look in her eyes as you do!”

“W-Wait. Momo?!”

I hadn’t been looking at him weirdly!

Well...probably.

“I *am* bored, though. Maybe we should head out,” Momo suggested.

“Yeah, let’s.”

The others were all away, after all, and it was boring with just the two of us waiting in the hotel room. The shopping district was waiting outside of the building.

The only other city I’d seen of this scope was in Laphroaig. No, this city was even *more* developed—it felt like the most advanced city in the world.

The two of us walked along the main street, looking at the stalls. We were on a different continent, so the food and clothing available were almost all things I’d never seen before. The sellers were all demons, but they didn’t say a word about seeing a human like me. My mentor had taught me that demons were our enemies, and yet everyone in this city smiled in greeting.

Makoto had told me that they were all charmed, but it honestly felt like all of their evilness had been removed.

Why is this continent so different from the others...?

It wasn’t fair. Humanity wasn’t happy at all on the western continent.

“Well, you’re a new face,” someone said.

“Huh?”

Momo immediately hid behind me. I looked and saw three girls, one of whom had spoken to her. They looked human at a glance, but they all had small fangs poking out.

They were vampires. I considered that they might be a danger, but they didn’t seem to show any hostility. Apparently, they were just honestly interested in Momo.

“Did you come from far away?” asked one. “We want to hear your story.”

“You seem strong—you must have had some quality blood.”

“Um...” Momo began, flustered. Gradually, she eased up and started talking.

As far as I knew, she’d never talked with kids of her own age. *This might be good for her.*

I watched over them for a while from a little distance away, but being on my own wasn’t all that fun.

If Makoto was here...

Suddenly, I saw a familiar face.

“Johnnie?”

“Oh, Lady Anna.”

It was indeed the handsome, redheaded elf.

“We might be protected by the curse, but surely you shouldn’t be on your own,” he said.

I was about to point out that he wasn’t one to talk, but then I noticed someone at his side. It wasn’t a person I’d met before.

“Say, is she one of your friends? She’s good-looking,” said the woman. She was a dark elf with dark skin, and she draped herself all over Johnnie.

“She’s one of the party members I was just telling you about,” he answered.

“Oh, and your leader controls the Undyne. I’d love to meet him.”

“U-Um...do you know her, Johnnie?”

This was the first time I’d met a dark elf—surely they were fully-fledged demons. And yet, she and Johnnie were acting so friendly, almost like acquaintances who’d just so happened to bump into each other.

“Is she a friend of yours?” I asked.

“No, we just met.”

“Huh?”

So they’d started talking while he was wandering the town? Then why were they *so* close?!

“C’mon, let’s hurry up,” she cajoled, tugging at his arm.

“Um...Johnnie, are you coming back?”

“I’ll be back by morning.”

“Uh...”

He was spending the night with her?! This was supposed to be enemy territory.

“The final battle is tomorrow,” he said sagely. “You should take the opportunity to get your spirits back up. Perhaps spend the night with Sir Makoto.”

“What?!”

With that shocking parting comment, he left with the woman.

W-With him...? I couldn’t even imagine it. I flapped a hand to fan my face and cool off.

Momo was still talking with the vampires.

Hmm, maybe I should head back, I thought. Then, I saw him. *Makoto!*

He was looking around curiously as he walked, heading away from the

hotel. He was obviously going out, but *where* was he going...?

W-Was he finding some woman?

Or maybe Momo was right...and he was having a rendezvous with Lady Helemmelk?! *No...he couldn't be. Definitely not.* I was still curious, though.

Before I knew it, I was sneaking after him.

We went farther and farther into the city, away from all the people. Surely this was the first time he'd been here... Yet he seemed to be following something—he didn't hesitate and seemed to keep to a specific path.

Eventually, we arrived somewhere away from the town. It was deserted, and it didn't seem like anyone *ever* came here.

And yet, he had folded his arms and was clearly waiting for someone. As he waited, he trained his water magic. I settled in where he wouldn't see me and started to watch.

Time passed and nothing changed. I considered heading back, but then...

Someone arrived. It wasn't a woman—that much was a relief. *Great, he's not out for a tryst.* But why had he come all the way out here where no one could see him? Who was he meeting?

When I saw the person he was talking to, I couldn't believe my eyes.

Wha...?

I felt like my breath might freeze in my chest. My pulse sped up, and I couldn't stop my hands from shaking.

Why... Why was *he* here?

The man's face was one I'd seen in Labyrinthos. There was no way I would forget it. Normally, he was completely covered in armor, not showing even a sliver of his face.

The black knight demon lord. The Wicked Deity's Apostle. And...the man who'd killed my mentor.

"Demon lord Cain..." I breathed.

He was meeting my mentor's killer.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"Ah, that was scary."

I left Astaroth's castle alone. Apparently, Mel was hanging back.

It seemed like there were still issues between the father and daughter,

but considering the amount of time since they had last met, they had things to talk about. I really hoped they took the time to reconcile.

Right now, I didn't want to make an enemy of Astaroth. I *had* promised to fight him at some point, though.

So, I strolled through all the demons thronging the capital. Luckily, I knew the way back to the hotel because of *Mapping*. I'd been scared when we'd first arrived, but walking through the town like this made today feel more like a stopover on a journey.

You... The fight with Iblis is tomorrow. Rest, would you? Ira told me.

She was right, but there was some stuff I was curious about.

Why are things so peaceful here, Ira?

In this city—and the village for that matter—no one had attacked us.

Well...that would be because of Nevias Charm.

I knew that, but the situation made me wonder. If every being on the planet was charmed in the same way...couldn't we bring peace to the world?

No! That's not happening! Ira yelled frantically in my head.

Kidding, Ira.

Uh... Your thoughts certainly sounded serious.

I came all this way to the past—I'm not going to change my policy now.

Despite that, though, Nevias didn't seem as evil as history portrayed her.

Idiot. A woman who uses Charm on anyone who won't obey her is not a good person.

Well, everyone seemed happy in Laphroaig at least.

My feelings were churning as I walked.

Hm? Ira asked me what was wrong.

“××××××. (This way.)”

I was being spoken to in Elemanti. By a water elemental. It was less than cheerful, though.

An elemental is calling me.

Is there a problem? Are you sure it's not a trap?

Nah, it's probably him.

He'd promised not to show up until the fight with Iblis was over, but maybe something unexpected had happened.

“×××, ×××. (This way, hurry.)”

The elemental's voice was far colder than any of the water elementals or Dia ever were when talking with me. Whoever was working through it

hadn't built a rapport at all.

Before I knew it, it had moved away. I walked quickly after it so I didn't lose sight. It guided me farther and farther from the city, all the way to a ruin devoid of people.

So was this our destination?

That black knight demon lord is going to show up, huh? Ira asked.

Probably. The only other elementalists in this world seemed to be Johnnie and him.

Johnnie wouldn't have been so indirect, so I was pretty sure it was Cain. I waited and waited, but no one appeared. *Come on.* If he was going to ask me somewhere, he should've at least shown up.

He's not here yet. I'm getting back to work. Call me if there's a problem.

I replied with an agreement and she cut off our connection.

Cain was Noah's believer, so Ira couldn't predict when he'd arrive.

Guess I should settle in and wait...

Around an hour later, he showed up.

"Makoto! Well done for surviving!"

The man was clad in black armor and was—as I expected—Cain. In order to not stand out (or something) he had forgone the helm he usually wore. Still, the almost full set of armor was plenty intimidating on its own.

"Did something happen?"

"Did something happen?" Someone cast the divine rank spell *Cocytus!*" he exclaimed. "Were you okay?!"

Oh, so he'd been worried. He'd come to check on me.

"I was fine. It was actually my spell."

"Wh-What...?"

Cain looked aghast. Well, it was one of the Sacred Deities' spells—of course he was surprised that I could use it. I was just considering how to explain things to him when the silence was broken.

"Makoto!!!"

The voice was furious, almost murderous. I shuddered and turned to look. Then, I went rigid.

"Hmph."

Instantly, Cain was in front of me, his sword ready. In front of *him...*

“Anna...”

She wasn't acting the same as normal. Her eyes were wild and her breath was coming in rapid heaves as she held her own sword at the ready.

Fuck!

I'd been too careless. How hadn't I noticed her? I was sure I'd used RPG Player to check behind me.

“Makoto...explain. Why are you speaking like this? Like you're friends with Demon Lord Cain?”

I looked back in silence.

“Say something!!!” Her voice sounded like she was about to explode in anger. *Actually, she might already be beyond that.* I could hear her teeth grind from here.

“He killed my mentor.”

There was a terrifying amount of mana building in her sword as she said that—just as much as when she'd cut down the demon lord. The air was shaking, and the ground itself followed suit. It felt like the slash could come at any moment.

Conversely, Cain—while his sword was ready—didn't even raise his aura.

“Makoto! Why... Why won't you say anything?”

What could I say? What would get us through this?

“Does that silence mean...you tricked me?”

Her eyes were red, filled with tears. I held her watery gaze, though I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

I couldn't exactly tell her to “calm down for now” or warn her to “not waste mana when the final battle with Iblis is tomorrow.” The situation had spiraled way beyond excuses like that.

I had to say *something* though. Just as I opened my mouth, someone else spoke over me.

“So you're the Hero of Light?”

Cain lowered his blade, returning it to his waist. Then, he spoke again, his face peaceful.

“Use your sword to take my head.”

◇ Anna's Perspective ◇

“Huh?”

That half-witted noise was all I could manage.

Makoto’s face looked conflicted as he spoke. “Cain... But...”

“It’s fine, Makoto,” Cain replied. “The only thing a worthless apostle like me can do for Noah is offer up my life. If the Hero of Light strikes me down here, it ought to keep things closer to the original history, right?”

What was he talking about? Anger and confusion warred within my head.

Cain turned back to me. “So, Hero of Light, cut me down. Save the world.” He stepped closer, a peaceful look on his face.

It was a bizarre sight, and I couldn’t help but step back. Emotions flared in my heart.

Kill him! Avenge your mentor!

I gritted my teeth, tightened my grip on the hilt of my sword, and pulled it back, ready to swing.

Cain didn’t move. He still looked so at peace.

I glanced at Makoto. *His* face was decidedly less relaxed. Was he not going to stop me? Wasn’t he on Cain’s side?

I don’t know! I don’t know anything! What’s the right answer?! What should I do?!

“URAAAHHH!”

Still confused, I swung, slicing through him. Cain made no move to avoid my blade.

Balamung went straight through his neck.

Blood spurted forth and Cain fell to his knees. The ground grew red.

“I... I...”

Finally... My dearest wish was fulfilled. On the day she’d died, I’d sworn I would have revenge. Now, I had it. But...I felt no sense of satisfaction. Not at all.

My sword fell to the ground with a clatter.

“Cain...”

Makoto appeared upset as he approached the armored demon lord.

Why did he look like that? He was on Cain’s side, wasn’t he? Had he betrayed me? But he hadn’t stopped me from taking revenge.

“What is it, Makoto?” I asked hesitantly.

Suddenly, something caught both of our attention.

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

Cain was slowly rising. The wound I’d inflicted had already completely healed.

“Wha...wha...?”

How?! I’d definitely cut him down—I’d used all my strength to do it. So why was he standing like nothing had happened?

“Cain... You’re alive??” Makoto asked, relief evident in his voice.

He nodded. “Yeah, thanks to my armor. It keeps me from dying.”

“Oh, right. It has a perfect healing spell on it, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed it does. It’s as impressive as you’d think a blessing from her would be.”

“Your armor’s great. I wanted it when I became her apostle as well.”

Cain grinned. “You can have it once I die.”

“I doubt it’ll fit.”

“Don’t worry, Noah made it. It will size itself to you when you wear it.”

“Huh...” Makoto scratched his cheek. “Still, I can’t equip anything heavier than a dagger anyway.”

“That’s got to be an exaggeration,” Cain said in disbelief.

“I’m dead serious. I can’t swing a shortsword, even using both hands.”

“Well... Maybe you should train your body some more.”

“I tried. My stats didn’t go up at all.”

As I looked on, the two of them were just having a relaxed conversation.

What’s with these two?!

My mind was just blank! I didn’t even feel angry anymore.

“Explain!” I demanded, closing in on Makoto. Right next to him, I could see Cain’s worried expression, but Makoto looked just the same as usual.

“Makoto!” I repeated for good measure.

“Well...you see...”

And with that, he started a reluctant explanation.

Finally, I knew the truth about him.

“You’re...from a thousand years in the future?”

I felt lightheaded. I found a nearby barrel and plopped down on it—there was no way I could remain standing.

“So, Althena gave me the duty of helping the savior of the world, Abe—Anna.”

Makoto gave a large stretch, apparently relieved to finally have the weight of his secret off his chest. He was the *only* one who seemed relaxed. *Not fair.*

Cain just stared vacantly into the distance. He didn’t seem threatening now—not like he’d been in Labyrinthos. I couldn’t sense any murderous intent radiating off him. Instead, he just seemed to be waiting for us to finish talking.

“And the two of you...?” I asked.

“Both follow Noah of the Titanea,” Makoto finished. “Cain’s her apostle in this era, and I hold that position in the future.”

“Isn’t Noah...a wicked deity?”

“Well, her set of gods lost the war, so that’s how she’s treated.” Makoto shrugged. “She’s actually trapped in a temple under the sea. Plus, she can only have one believer at a time, so she’s in a really weak position.”

I looked between the two of them. *They believe in the same goddess, but Makoto didn’t betray me at all.*

All of this was far beyond my expectations.

“So, what do I do now?” Cain asked, his voice confused. “I would happily offer my life for Noah.”

He sounded so accepting of his own death. The bitter taste in my mouth won out over my anger.

“Makoto, what do you want to do?” I asked.

He looked blankly back at me. After a moment, he spoke, his voice soft and sad. “Well, it might be inevitable...but Noah would lament losing her only believer.”

That was it. He didn’t tell me not to take my revenge—he didn’t tell me not to kill Cain.

In other words, he was leaving the choice up to me and telling me to do what I wanted. He’d done the same earlier when he hadn’t prevented me from cutting Cain down.

I recalled what he’d said about the divine edict from Althena.

Makoto is here for me. He’s unshakably on my side.

That was why he’d gone back to the past all on his own.

“Will you be returning to the future?” I asked. This question had been

bothering me since I'd found out his secret.

"I want to, but I'll have to find some way to do it." He chuckled. "Ira's spell was only one-way."

I couldn't smile back.

He's been fighting here, alone, away from everyone he ever knew...

I hadn't known any of this—I'd just kept putting burdens on him and allowing him to keep saving me. And if I killed Cain, Makoto would be losing the one person who shared in his faith.

I still hated this demon lord for killing my mentor. Even so, hearing how Makoto had sacrificed everything to save the world, I didn't feel like my individual revenge should be a priority.

Forgive me... I mentally pleaded to my mentor.

"Demon Lord Cain, if you claim to be Makoto's ally, then help us tomorrow against Iblis."

I'll...give up on revenge.

Cain looked shocked. "Are you certain?"

"Yeah, Anna, are you sure?" Makoto asked.

Both of them were staring at me strangely.

"Enough! Let's explain things to the others!"

Before I could change my mind, I grabbed hold of Makoto's hand and pulled him back to the hotel.



We got back quickly and explained to the others that Cain was on our side now.

Lady Helemmelk and Momo were wide-eyed in surprise.

When we explained Makoto's situation and revealed that he was actually from the future, the two were so shocked that they couldn't even speak.

"That...was not what I imagined," Lady Helemmelk said eventually, her voice shaking.

"Sir Makoto is going back to the future?!" Momo asked.

She seemed to have the same question as me. When we told her that he wanted to return but didn't know how, she looked even more conflicted.

After that, we asked him about the era he'd come from.

Demon Lord Cain had excused himself and vanished off into an empty

room. Makoto told us about how he'd come from another world, and about how he was a hero in a place called Roses.

He spoke of fighting alongside his friends against a demon lord and about the lovers he'd left behind.

Then...he explained the one-way route he'd taken to get here.

We all let out a breath. The goddess's spell was truly astonishing. I wanted to hear more about it, but we needed to rest to be ready for tomorrow, so we left it there.

Incidentally, Johnnie wasn't present—he'd apparently been serious about staying overnight with that woman. But when we told him all about time travel the next day, he said that the situation sounded like something Makoto would be involved in.

He was far too calm about things. He *did* waver when he saw Demon Lord Cain, though.

And so, we all waited in an odd assortment—me, Makoto, Momo, Lady Helemmelk, Johnnie...and Cain.

When the time came, it was just past noon.

"I have arrived. I shall guide you to the Great One."

Queen Nevia smiled. She was standing with her knights in front of the hotel.



Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Is Questioned by the Great Demon Lord

“Oh, Cain. I was worried when you vanished,” Nevia said, apparently not shocked to see him with us.

For his part, Cain just remained silent. It wasn’t just him—none of the others even looked at her. The reason? *Charm*, of course. Her skill took away all agency, and a person could be charmed by simply hearing her voice. Even Anna had faltered yesterday against the strength of Queen Nevia’s *Charm*, and she was the Hero of Light.

Considering all this, only one of us would speak with her.

“Thank you for your assistance, Your Majesty,” I answered.

I was the moon priestess’s guardian knight, so I already knew that Furiae’s *Charm* didn’t work on me.

“My, you are the only one willing to speak with me, Makoto Takatsuki. How lonely.”

“They’re all shy.”

She giggled. “Well, let us all get along today.”

“Right.”

“The Great One is anxious to meet you all. This way.”

With that, she climbed atop a blight dragon. We were hardly going to ride *with* her, so Mel reverted to her dragon form to act as our transport. We followed Queen Nevia, setting off through the gloomy sky. We didn’t need to even ask where we were going—it was obvious.

Eden, the Floating Castle.

That was Iblis’s palace—it had appeared in the skies over Lees last night. It was hard to judge the scale of it from the ground, but I did know one thing.

It’s huge...

Mel’s climb through the sky made its true size clear. It was about as high as the *Clouds of Darkness*, and using *Clairvoyance*, I could tell that it was

probably about as big as an airport.

The land mass the castle rested upon was an oval, and it was covered by some dark material. I couldn't decide whether it looked metallic or crystalline. It seemed artificial, but even in my old world, I couldn't have imagined something so huge actually flying around.

We were two to three hundred meters away from it when something changed. The air felt heavy, like it was catching in my chest. Something mist-like was blocking our sight. Was that miasma...? It reminded me of Forest of Fiends in Springroque.

That's a barrier Iblis constructed, Ira explained in my head.

So we were in *his* territory now.

"It looks like we're in Iblis's barrier now," I said to the others. "Are you all coping?"

They all nodded, so I was assured that they weren't having problems. At least the barrier didn't seem like it could produce any offensive attacks.

Soon, the queen's blight dragon softly alighted on the floating island. Mel followed suit and we all carefully stepped down onto the ground.

"It's..."

This was a strange place. The ground wasn't made of dirt, but of some material that looked like sparkling, cracked glass. There were no plants, but there were bones on the ground—they seemed to be from creatures I'd never seen before.

However, out of everything, the most eye-catching thing was...

"Sir Makoto...I don't feel so good..."

Momo's face was pinched; Anna wore a similar look.

Blight monsters...

Warped monsters squirmed all over the island. I had to admit, they were somehow even worse than the blight monsters I'd seen in the past—almost like failed experiments.

There was a slime with blood vessels crisscrossing its surface, an orc with several heads, and goblins with no skin, just exposed nerves. There were even snakes missing their scales that looked like they were covered in peeled-back skin. None of them were proper creatures.

The queen was giggling.

"Adorable, are they not? The Great One created them."

She was apparently the only one who found them to be charming—the

soft caresses she was giving them were evidence of that.

“R-Right,” I nodded along, feeling a muscle jump in my cheek. Obviously, I didn’t feel that they were cute at all. I looked around the island, doing my best to keep my eyes off the disgusting creatures.

The massive tower in the center of the island was what drew my eye next. Strictly speaking, it was the *only* structure on the island. I’d heard it called Iblis’s castle, but it didn’t look like any castle I’d ever seen.

Was Iblis really in there? And a tower, huh? Hmmm.

You seem concerned, Makoto Takatsuki.

Ira, this is a trap, right?

Well, towers are usually used to amplify magic...

Mages often used items to improve the power of their spells. For example, Lucy always had her staff with her, and Rosalie used magic circles to strengthen her magic. When mages were constructing large-scale spells, they would build towers and use them in the spell’s casting.

A big spell cast by Iblis...

I remembered that day-night reversal while we were fighting Bifrons. If Iblis could do that repeatedly, it wouldn’t even be a fight.

Don’t worry! That tower just looks like it’s designed to protect whoever’s inside it. I doubt it serves a magical purpose.

She sounded confident as she denied my concerns.

That doesn’t help...

Why?!

Well, you keep messing up your predictions.

I-It’s fine. Believe me!

Well, worrying about it wasn’t going to help. If things came down to the wire, we would just need to flee.

By the way, Ira, do you know what Iblis looks like?

I’d asked Cain and Mel about it first, but they’d both been rather meek and neither had said a word. Apparently, they didn’t want to talk about it. So what on earth did he look like...?

Well, not even we goddesses can tell you precisely... In the original history, the Hero of Light lost an arm and a leg in the final battle but managed to defeat Iblis. Because of the clouds, Althena can’t really talk with Anna, though.

I was impressed that Anna had managed to defeat him in that state. I

glanced over at her. There was no way I'd let her suffer like that...

"Makoto, what's wrong?" Anna directed a tense smile at me.

"It's fine," I said, trying to make sure she was as relaxed as possible.

"Let's take it slow."

I'd spent the morning gathering as much sunlight for her as possible. Now she could be even stronger than when we'd fought the demon lords' armies yesterday. My only role was to make sure she was at full strength.

Makoto Takatsuki, you are all about to face Iblis, so speak with the others.

Oh, right. I followed her advice.

"Johnnie, how are you?"

"Just fine." He had both of his eyes closed but was walking with confidence.

We'd heard that most humans who met Iblis didn't keep their sanity. Mel was a monster and Momo was a vampire, so I figured they'd probably be fine—Anna had her blessing from the *Hero of Light* skill. So what of Johnnie, who was neither a monster nor had the protection of a hero?

He'd just said: "I shall keep my eyes closed from the start and have the elementals inform me of the situation."

Guess he can fight even with his eyes closed. He really was impressive. Considering how clumsy Lucy could be in all sorts of ways, it was hard to believe they were related.

I turned to Momo and saw that she looked really ill. "Hey, you good?" I asked.

"I-I'm fine..."

"Don't push yourself too much."

"Right, Sir Makoto."

I felt awful that she was even here for the battle, but we needed her. She wasn't a combatant, though—she was our escape route. She and Mel were the only two who could cast *Teleport*. Having more than one *Teleport* user would be a boon for us if things went sideways. But more than that, Momo was here because she *wanted* to come with us.

I gently held her hand.

"Mel, Cain, what about—"

"Don't worry."

"I've been here many times."

Well, those two seemed fine. All that was left now was...

What about you? Ira asked. *Space-time is warped on the island, and the miasma is pretty thick.*

I looked around and took a deeper breath than usual. Honestly, I didn't really feel anything.

Well, you are incredibly dense.

Rude. You could have praised me for keeping my cool.

I suppose your audacity will be useful. Make sure you're ready to cast the divine rank spell at any time.

It's fine. I'll have Dia ready too. Speaking of...

I turned to her. "How're *you* doing?"

"My liege..." she said weakly. "I dislike this place..."

Apparently, Iblis's barrier was unpleasant for elementals. Well, we expected that. The strength of an elemental's magic depended on the environment.

"Got it. I'll call you if things go bad."

"Right..." Her voice got quieter. "Take care, my liege." I'd checked in with everyone. Now we just had to battle Iblis.

Queen Nevia, who was leading the way, didn't turn back. *I suppose she couldn't hear our conversation.* I'd been almost positive that she would have something to say about us.

Hm...

Watching her walk, I realized her steps were just slightly heavy.

Is she hurt...? No, it looks more like exhaustion.

I didn't know why, but the queen looked tired.

We soon arrived in front of the tower at the center of the island. We stood before the massive front door, and just as I was wondering how we'd open it, it began to ever so slowly creak open.

The space inside was pitch-black—nothing was visible from where we stood.

"This way," said Queen Nevia as she walked through the door.

We followed.

Hm?

An odd sensation swept over us. It was similar to what I'd felt when we'd approached the island.

We'd passed through another barrier. *The tower itself must have one too.*

Ira was right—this was a tower for defensive purposes. Two layers of barriers seemed like pretty cautious planning.

The inside of the tower was dimly lit. A sweet scent filled the building.

That's...familiar.

The drug. I remembered how prevalent this smell had been in the bars of Symphonia. But why did Iblis have drugs here?

I looked around with *Night Vision*. The whole area was deserted. Unlike with Astaroth, there was no sign of any subordinates. Instead, something else drew my eye.

Complicated magic circles were inlaid all over the floor in an overlapping mass.

Just looking at them made me feel uneasy. They seemed to have been drawn in a disorganized heap, but there had to be some purpose to them. I spied a formula that gathered mana at the middle of the floor.

Someone gulped. I could hear my own heart pounding.

He's here.

We were finally faced with the ruler of this world, the Great Demon Lord Iblis.

There was a figure standing in the center of the tower. When I spotted it, I frowned.

The hell...?

Those were the first words that came to mind.

A throne-like structure was resting on a dais. The beautiful Queen Nevia of Laphroaig, the Witch of Calamity, stood next to the throne.

“Everyone, you are now in the presence of the Great Iblis,” she announced.

The Great Demon Lord Iblis; the leader of the demon lords that ruled the world; an undying monster that could use all magics and was unmoved by any attack; a defiler capable of even raising the dead; someone who drove all who saw him to fear. I had heard all sorts of things about him, but nothing specific. I'd even heard people say that he was an amorphous creature with no fixed form.

But...

“You're Iblis?” I asked *it*. Even with Nevia's introduction, I wasn't entirely sure.

It wasn't humanoid. In fact, it wasn't like any living creature at all.

To put it simply, Iblis was a floating mass of flesh. Sprouting and writhing from its body were the heads and limbs of humans, insects, and even monsters.

It looked closer to an art installation than an actual creature.

Still, it was pulsing, so it was definitely alive. The clashing red, blue, and yellow splattered all over it was almost painful to look at.

Hands coming out of its fleshy body were wriggling unpleasantly like tentacles, and its many mouths were making a terrible keening noise. But the eyes drew my attention above everything else—they were studded all over the surface of the creature, glowing in all colors of the rainbow, and swiveling grotesquely around in their sockets.

Several of the eyes were staring at me. I felt goose bumps rise on my skin as I stared back.

It's...sorta like a blight monster...

The blight monsters outside of the tower were unpleasant enough, but the thing in front of us now made those things look downright cuddly. Sarcastic though it may be, I could now agree with the queen calling them cute. Could this thing even talk?

As I was waiting for a response, the queen let out a happy gasp.

“How wonderful! You are the only one to maintain your sanity upon seeing Lord Iblis!”

“Huh?” Something seemed wrong with that. I turned around. “Guh!”

The others were all passed out. Anna, Momo, and even Mel were flat on the floor. *Come on! Cain, why are you down as well?!*

The only one still conscious was Johnnie, but he'd fallen to his knees. Apparently not looking at Iblis directly had helped.

I quickly grabbed Anna, pulling her upright.

“Anna! Stay with us. Johnnie, are you okay?!”

“I am,” he replied. “It's just the miasma...”

At least he'd managed to respond. Momo and Mel were coming around too. I'd have to leave them to it, though.

During my party's floundering, I'd been on the lookout for an attack, but neither Iblis nor Queen Nevia did anything. She just gazed down at us with an easy smile.

“Ma...ko...to.”

Anna's face was pallid, but she managed to open her mouth. There was

hardly any light in her eyes, and they weren't focused.

I put my hand on her forehead and muttered, "*Sun Magic: Synchro.*"

I used the low rank sun magic spell *Heal*. It was unrefined, but because I was synchronized with the Hero of Light, it activated, and she gradually came around.

"Anna, once you're able to concentrate, use healing magic on yourself."

"R-Right... Makoto, what are you—?"

Before Anna could finish the question, I'd held my hand out and cast a waterball. The basketball-sized sphere of water collided with Cain's sleeping face.

"Bwah?!" He leaped to his feet. "I passed out?!"

"Just a bit," I said coldly. *I thought you'd met him several times?!*

Cain began frantically excusing himself. "No! I've...never seen *that* before!"

"He is right," Mel murmured in response. "The Iblis I know looked nothing like that..."

Oh?

Did we have the wrong Great Demon Lord? I looked back toward Iblis and Queen Nevia.

All the blight monster's shining eyes had closed again, and his surroundings were mired in deep fog. The unpleasantness wasn't quite as bad anymore.

"How regrettable," Queen Nevia said with a deep sigh. "Only *you* are able to witness his splendor in full."

"What's going on?" I asked. Though, judging by how Anna and Mel had reacted, I had an idea.

I'd seen something similar before...when everyone in the cathedral had witnessed Noah.

Suddenly, a beautiful woman's voice resounded in the tower. "Why are you here?!"

Momo and Cain's heads shot up, and they frantically looked around for the source of the voice.

"Wh-Who was that?"

"Who are you?"

I wasn't surprised, though. The voice was familiar at this point.

"Ira?" I asked. Normally I could only hear it through telepathy, though.

“Oooh,” taunted Queen Nevia, her tone mocking. “Goddess of heaven, should you really be interfering in this world? You’ll be punished, you know.”

“Nevia! Why are you with him? What is Naya doing?!”

Queen Nevia giggled. “Naya doesn’t interfere. You should know that.”

Anna’s shoulders shook at the anger in Ira’s voice. I put a hand soothingly on her shoulder.

“Ira, what are you so angry about?” I asked.

“Makoto Takatsuki...”

It didn’t seem like she wanted to tell me right away. Honestly, it was odd enough that we could hear her at all. Voices couldn’t reach the earth from heaven. That was why I had the communication necklace she’d given me.

“The barrier makes this space another realm—*that’s* why you can hear me.”

“Another realm...”

It *had* felt odd to pass through the barrier. But it also hadn’t done anything to thwart us as intruders. Even with my stats being as low as they were, I didn’t feel worse in any way.

“What’s the barrier for?” I asked.

“Well—”

“The Great One can only survive within it,” Queen Nevia interrupted. Her face fell, and she looked morose.

“What...does that mean?” Anna asked. She stood next to me, Balamung at the ready, though her face still looked pale.

“Ira, can you please explain?”

I waited for her answer.

“He...is a scrapped divinity,” Ira admitted. “A being that failed to become a god. Typhon didn’t summon a demon lord from another world, he sent a *divinity* here. I can’t believe he would so clearly cross the divine laws...”

“A divinity...?”

I once again looked at the mass of flesh floating in the air. Those writhing hands and tentacles didn’t look “divine” in the slightest. It was just a sickening monster. Besides, it hadn’t even spoken, so was it actually intelligent?

“You are a rude man.”

A handsome-looking boy suddenly appeared from the mass of flesh. He was half transparent like a ghost.

I tilted my head in confusion. “And you are?”

“Iblis. I already introduced myself, did I not?”

“Hm?”

I was about to say that it was the first time he’d spoken but then I realized that the keening sound from earlier was probably him trying to speak to us.

“It seems you didn’t understand my words,” the boy who claimed to be Iblis said. He sounded genuinely regretful. “I shall have to take this rather inconvenient form, then—just my soul. Allow me to correct one thing, Ira. I am not here due to Typhon’s command. I am simply a weak Scrap that escaped the underworld. I admit that I can’t live outside of this tower, though. The mana in this place is too scarce, so the very air is like poison to me. In fact, the tower itself barely sustains me.”

“Huh...”

So if I break the tower...it'll defeat him?

“I would prefer you refrain,” Iblis said. “If you try, I will attack in earnest.”

He’d read my mind, just like Noah and Eir always did. It still seemed weird that he would outright state his weakness, though. I made sure I was ready to cast the divine rank spell at any moment.

He seemed to pick up on my thoughts once more, and he sent an easy smile in my direction.

“Future Hero Makoto Takatsuki of Roses.”

I let his words hang in the silent air for a few moments. “What? I find it odd that you know me.”

Anna and the others seemed shaken, but I wasn’t surprised—Iblis was a god, so he must have known about me this whole time.

The boy scoffed. “It’s hardly odd. I manipulated the past when I revived in the future to deal with the Hero of Light. I had not expected an assassin to be sent from the future. And Noah’s apostle at that...” His voice dropped in volume at the end of his statement.

“Well, you revived in the future. Why not just put in all this effort during that era?”

It was because of his manipulations that I’d had to travel through time.

“Surely you already know. The rulers in the future are humans. Demons are relegated to the northern continent, and too few of our pillars of strength, the demon lords, still survive. There is no chance of victory in the future.”

I stared silently back at him. He was speaking sadly, but it all felt like lies. Eir had once said that a fight against the Great Demon Lord would be a fifty-fifty shot.

“Sir Makoto...”

“Makoto Takatsuki...”

Momo and Cain had come around properly while I’d been buying time. We were all more or less safe. Just one problem: all Iblis needed to do was revert to his blighted form, and it would knock everyone out again.

“Makoto Takatsuki, use the divine rank spell to destroy this tower. That will prevent him from using his full power even in his true form,” Ira said. “Then just leave the rest to the Hero of Light.”

I gave a small nod. *That was my idea too. There’s nothing else we can do.*

I put my hand around the necklace she’d given me.

“Are you going to waste your anima like that?” Iblis asked, stopping me.

“Waste?”

It was an odd way of putting it. Was there a better way?

“Of course. You want to use her anima to destroy the tower, but you could use it to strengthen yourself instead. You could become an invincible warrior or archmage. After all, divine magic can cause any miracle.”

“Is that possible, Ira?” I asked. I wasn’t going to take Iblis at his word.

She didn’t reply.

“If you wanted to make yourself unaging and undying, you could easily return to the future. That’s your greatest wish, is it not?”

That startled me.

Since I’d traveled to the past, I’d assumed I’d need to travel back. But if I made myself immortal...I could *live* the thousand years. The future would, in essence, travel to me.

Divine magic could do that, huh...

“M-Makoto Takatsuki...it...” Ira’s voice was shaky.

“It would seem that the goddess does not agree with that method. Well, it is anima granted to you by her mistake. A demigod birthed through it

would be far from convenient for her.”

Ira didn’t refute his words. So he was dead-on.

A way back...

I finally had one. Actually, I’d had one for a while, though I hadn’t realized I could use the anima here to get back home.

Iblis seemed to notice the hesitation, so he continued.

“How about it? Renounce the goddesses and their ceaseless demands. Join me.”

“We need another ruler of the western continent. That position is now vacant,” Queen Nevia added with a smile.

They aren’t attacking—just talking. This must be the main event.

“Makoto...” Anna murmured, gripping my arm. I looked back and saw that both Cain and Mel were looking uneasy.

I already knew my answer, though.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m not becoming a demon lord.”

“I see...” Queen Nevia said with a disappointed look.

The expression of Iblis’s boyish form didn’t change.

“That makes sense. After all, you are here through Althena’s divine edict to serve the Hero of Light, and you possess Ira’s anima. The seat of a demon lord is far from sufficient.”

Iblis floated through the air, getting closer to me. Unlike the mass of flesh over the throne, this form didn’t seem threatening at all. The boy, with artificially perfect features, spoke to me with a smile.

“Makoto Takatsuki, if you join me, I shall grant you half of the world.”

“Wha?!” Queen Nevia exclaimed in shock. “Lord Iblis, are you serious?!”

Anna and the others also gasped. Even I was a little surprised.

“How generous,” I said.

“You are worth it. You need not be a State-Authorized Hero of some tiny nation in the future. You should be ruling this world. And if you use that anima, you can do so for almost eternity.”

His voice caressed my ears.

“Now, just take my hand, and you can rule this world with me.”

He smiled, and letters on a screen appeared at his side.

Will you take half of the world from Iblis?

Yes

No



◇ Momo's Perspective ◇

Teacher Mel's voice woke me up.

"Are you...okay?" she asked.

"I...am..."

Iblis had knocked me out, and she had woken me back up. Her face was just as pale as mine, though. Johnnie, Anna, and even that terrifying black knight had been overwhelmed by the sight of the Great Demon Lord.

But...

There was one oddity among us.

"Well, well, *RPG Player* really is a blessing."

Sir Makoto was the only one of us acting normally. Actually...no. Nothing about this was normal. He was *enjoying* the conversation with Iblis.

Scary...

It was the first time I'd been afraid of him. Until now, I'd just seen him as someone I could rely on. He'd seen us through any adversity we'd faced. But...

Seeing him talk happily with that *thing*...

Was he even human?

Queen Nevia spoke next. She still had that smile on her face. "So, hero from the future, will you not rule the world alongside the Great One?"

"Makoto...you can't..." murmured Anna, whose pallor was still deathly pale.

"Don't, Makoto Takatsuki." That voice had come, strangely, from the very air itself.

Right, what had Iblis said? He would give Sir Makoto half of the world.

Sir Makoto looked conflicted.

N-No...

I staggered toward him, but my legs were shaking so much that they couldn't hold my weight, so I fell over.

"Now, take my hand," commanded Iblis.

"Come, Makoto Takatsuki," said Queen Nevia. "Join us."

Sir Makoto gave no response. He just stared into the empty air.

H-He couldn't. He wouldn't say he'd join them...would he?

Suddenly, Sir Makoto spoke to the silent black knight.

“Hey, Cain?”

“Hm? What?”

“Iblis made you a promise, right? That he’d get Noah out of the Seafloor Temple.”

Both Iblis and the queen fell silent.

Uh...Noah is his goddess, right?

“Great Demon Lord Iblis,” said Sir Makoto. “If you free Noah from the Seafloor Temple, then both Cain and I will happily join you.”

I blurted out a dumbfounded “Huh?” and was unable to say anything else.

“Makoto?! What are you doing?!” Anna yelled angrily.

“Are you serious?” Johnnie asked. Even he was shaken by it.

“Of course I am. That is, assuming he *can* free Noah. What do you say, Iblis?”

“Makoto Takatsuki, there is no need to be coy,” Queen Nevia said coquettishly. “This is half of the world we are talking about. How could you possibly be dissatisfied with that?”

“For Noah’s believers, freeing her would be everything,” Sir Makoto countered. “Isn’t that right, Cain?”

“R-Right... That’s true...”

Iblis and Queen Nevia exchanged troubled looks. Then, that strange, omnipresent voice spoke again.

“Now you’re just being unkind.”

“Goddess...” I heard Teacher Mel mutter reverently.

So that voice belongs to a goddess...

“Those two can’t possibly free Noah,” the goddess continued. “The temple is protected by the divine beast Leviathan.”

“I don’t think it’s possible either,” Cain muttered.

Sir Makoto cut in, his voice sharp for once. “Hey, it’s one thing if Ira doesn’t think it’s possible, but you’re Noah’s believer! You shouldn’t be giving up!”

“S-Sorry, I was kidding!”

Just...how was Sir Makoto able to speak so freely to both a demon lord and a goddess?

Sir Makoto turned back to the Great Demon Lord. “So?” he pressed.

Iblis seemed to fumble for words. “Well...”

This was weird. The Great Demon Lord had been so magnanimous before—he’d even offered half of the world to get Sir Makoto on his side. But now that Sir Makoto had given a counteroffer of rescuing someone from “the Seafloor Temple,” he seemed much more meek. Even the queen at his side looked distinctly concerned. Apparently, rescuing Sir Makoto’s goddess was an even bigger deal than ruling half of the world.

Suddenly, a voice resounded through the tower. It sent a shiver down my spine.

There is no reasoning with you.

“Huh?”

Instantly, we were engulfed in darkness. I couldn’t see a thing.

Since you are so unwilling to listen... I shall have to take your companions hostage.

“Sir Makoto! Teacher Mel!” I yelled. They’d been right next to me just a second ago!

The voice chuckled. **Your yelling is pointless. This area is isolated. No one can hear you.**

It sounded like the voice was speaking directly to me, but it was possible that everyone else was in the same situation. Either way, we’d all been separated in the blink of an eye.

I...didn’t know what to do.

Water Magic (Divine Rank): Cocytus.

Of course, it was Sir Makoto who saved me from my panic. The dark mist gradually cleared. Teacher Mel, Johnnie, and Anna were all here. It was hard to see the dark knight Cain, but even he seemed to be safe.

Then there was Sir Makoto. He had a slight smile on his face, and his voice was almost infuriatingly calm

“Well, Iblis, if you’re going to attack, I’ll answer in kind. Divine rank spells should work, no?”

“Sir Makoto!” I exclaimed, rushing over to him. I clung tightly to his side.

“Momo, are you okay?” he asked.

“I-I’m fine! Should you be using that spell?” From what I’d heard, he could only use it *once*. So if he was using it to save us...

A crack resounded in the room.

Well done. You reacted instantly in the best way you could.

Along with the cracking, I heard the sound of something crumbling.

“The tower...”

I didn’t know who had pointed it out, but they were right. The tower we were standing in had been turned to ice, and now, it was crumbling. Eventually, it broke apart completely, and the fragments were carried away on the wind, leaving us standing in something like a plaza.

“Iblis can’t survive outside of the tower,” said Sir Makoto.

My eyes widened. “So you destroyed it!” Sir Makoto had instantly seen the path to save both us *and* defeat Iblis.

A gap in the *Clouds of Darkness* allowed sunlight to pierce down from the sky.

I grunted—the sunlight was sapping my strength because I was a vampire. Sir Makoto gently took my weight, supporting me.

Anima truly does unbalance things. The situation has been reversed in a single move.

Iblis’s mass of flesh was undulating in front of us. It didn’t seem as horrifying or overwhelming as when we’d first seen it, though.

The Great Demon Lord’s body was slowly breaking down.

That’s...such a relief...

My body felt suddenly slack with the release of tension. That sensation, coupled with the sunlight shining on my body, made my consciousness fade once again.

Before I fully passed out, though, I heard Queen Nevia sigh.

“The future is inevitable...”

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

The tower had fallen apart, and Iblis—being a god from another realm—couldn’t survive outside of it. Apparently.

Allegedly, a god on the level of Noah or Eir would’ve been fine in the mortal realm, but Iblis wasn’t that powerful. As far as the Great Demon Lord was concerned, the barrier falling ought to be fatal. His body gradually started to lose its form.

Unfortunately, someone stopped that decay in its tracks.

“Lord Iblis, please, use my body,” urged Queen Nevia. Immediately one

of Iblis's tentacle-like hands wrapped around her. Then, dozens of black arms writhed their way up her beautiful body in an almost obscene spectacle.

What...the hell?

"Ngh...hahhh."

Hearing those soft moans... Watching her face—so reminiscent of Furiae's—flush red... It was honestly kinda hot.

Her black dress was rolled up, showing quite a lot of skin. It put her in a rather compromising position.

As I stared, Anna spoke coldly from my side. "Makoto?"

"I didn't see anything," I protested.

"Liar."

Yup, I was one.

"Stop fooling around and attack!" Ira yelled. "Iblis is becoming one with Nevia!"

"What?!" Anna and I exclaimed in unison, turning around to look.

A great wind blasted us with gusts of miasma. That wasn't all—Queen Nevia and the broken form of Iblis were now surrounded by a black surface. A barrier.

"Lightning Spellbow: Storm."

"Fire Magic: Phoenix."

Johnnie and Mel's spells struck the dark barrier, but it showed no sign of breaking. I signaled to Cain with a look.

"Dia!" I called. *"Water Magic: Yamata no Orochi."*

Cain sliced at the barrier as my spell struck it. A deluge of water engulfed it, pressing in on the darkness as Cain's blade slammed into its surface.

But...

"It's...not working," Anna said weakly.

Not even Dia's magic and Noah's weapon had broken it. All we had left was...

I looked at the Hero of Light at my side. She gazed back and then nodded shallowly. The sword in her hand began to glow white.

However, before she could actually carry out the attack, the barrier vanished.

"Apologies for the delay."

The voice came from the mouth of a much-changed Nevia. Her pale skin had darkened—her long black hair was now glowing with every color of the rainbow. Her golden eyes, capable of charming everything, seemed to gleam all the more. She had already been just as gorgeous as Furiae, but after merging with Iblis, her beauty was almost otherworldly, just like a goddess's.

“Nevia...I apologize.”

“Worry not. All that I am is yours.”

Strangely, both of their voices were coming from the same mouth.

Suddenly, Ira's voice resounded in my head.

Makoto Takatsuki, the Great Demon Lord...no, the Scrap has fallen to the mortal realm. Merging with the moon priestess has caused him to lose his divinity. The Hero of Light can defeat him now.

“Anna, can you kill her?” I asked.

“M-Me...?”

She'd been overwhelmed by the Witch of Calamity's presence. After merging with Iblis right in front of us, her presence felt more threatening than even Astaroth's. Even so, Anna managed to marshal herself and ready her sword.

Meanwhile, Nevia was looking dispassionately at us. Huge amounts of mana were radiating from her body—even more than I usually felt from the Undyne.

“You are far from the Hero of Light in the original timeline,” she said.
“Will you be my opponent?”

Hmm...

This was going to be tough. Mel, Johnnie, and I could fight alongside Anna, but since none of us had even put a scratch on that barrier, I figured we might be more hindrance than help. Anna, our strongest fighter, flinched back from the strength Nevia was emanating.

Come on, Makoto Takatsuki. Time for Strategy 77!

Oh yeah. Now that the barrier from the tower was down, I was the only one who could hear Ira.

Forget about that and get on with it!

“Strategy XX” referred to the many tricks Ira had told me about. They were all things I could use to potentially defeat Iblis. And she wanted me to use 77 of all of them...

That's your only choice now! Pull your finger out!

Fine...

I got ready.

Letters floated up in front of me.

Are you really going to do it? Seriously?

Guess not

I have to!

Quit it, *RPG Player*.

"Anna," I said, calling her name gently.

"Makoto..." She looked back at me uneasily.

I put my hands on her shoulders...and kissed her.



“Huh?” Her eyes went wide.

Suddenly, there was a dramatic change.

“Wha?! Uh! What?!”

Her body had begun to give off aura in a prismatic mist.

Hmph. Nicely done. You know what’s next, don’t you? Ira’s voice was heavy now.

“U-Um... Makoto? What was that...?”

The unease had faded from her face, and she was now looking at me with shining eyes.

Okay, finish it off! Strategy 78!

The goddess was chattering away in my mind. Ah, forget it! It wasn’t like I had any other ideas.

“Before we die,” I murmured, “I need to tell you. I... I...I-love you, Anna.”

Her face went bright red, and I could practically hear the steam pouring off her. It’d worked, though. Her entire body was shining like another sun.

Great! The Hero of Light has awakened! All because big sister Althena made the skill evolve through intense emotions!

Why’d Althena put a condition like that on it?! According to the normal timeline, she would have awoken through a desire for vengeance, but, for *some* reason, she was much more at peace this way.

Ira’s plan had been to awaken her through love for me. Surely that wasn’t right?

“I-I love you too...” she replied, and I could practically feel the heat in her voice.

I definitely didn’t dislike Anna—I was honestly fond of her. However, I hadn’t wanted to say something like this *here*.

I’m definitely going to hell.

“Watch me, Makoto.” Anna brandished her sword. That tiny movement set off a blast of mana-laden wind. Now that I’d lost my anima, she was so much stronger than I was—there was no way I would be of any help to her.

“This is certainly absurd,” said Queen Nevia. “Is this truly the Hero of Light’s awakened strength?”

Nevia was holding a staff I’d never seen before, looking almost tired. Apparently, she hadn’t just been waiting during Anna’s awakening—she’d summoned a weapon.

“I shall destroy you in Lord Iblis’s stead.”

The Witch of Calamity, having merged with Iblis, pointed the staff at us. Waves of miasma launched off of it.

“I won’t let you.” The awakened Anna moved forward, her sword wreathed in prismatic light.

The final battle had begun.

Anna let loose a light swing of her sword. Even that minor attack blasted me with enough wind that I could barely stand.

The shining blade in her hand expelled countless blades of light. Each one of them was as strong as a saint rank attack. The air was shaking. Facing them, Queen Nevia smiled serenely. The staff in her hand was emitting a pitch-black miasma, just like the rest of her body. As she spoke, her beautiful voice seemed at odds with that disgusting sight.

Reversal Magic: Darkness Grasper.

Countless black hands grew from her staff, grabbing and smothering Anna’s blades of light.

“You’re a human, aren’t you?” Anna yelled. “Why are you on Iblis’s side?!”

I’d been sure that Queen Nevia would ignore her, but surprisingly, she answered.

“I’m a cambion, not a human,” she said with a sigh.

She cast her next spell.

Reversal Magic: Dark Augur.

This dark spell conjured a huge black bird. It was like Lucy’s phoenix spell—the one she was so good at—but far more *ominous*.

In a flash, the one bird turned into a flock and attacked Anna.

“I was born to a concubine of the king,” said the queen. “I’ve possessed miasma since my birth, and because of the strength of my demon heritage, I was confined. I would have lived my life as a pitiful, imprisoned princess...”

“So that’s...why you hate...” Anna was panting raggedly, only barely keeping up with Queen Nevia’s onslaught. I wanted to help, but with my current power, nothing I could do would make a meaningful difference.

“I was chosen as the Priestess of the Moon, though. Naya granted me the power to charm all living creatures. It was a simple matter to use *Charm* to rule Laphroaig, and even invading demons were no match for my skill. I

had power over all creatures, and I figured that while I was at it, I should use *Charm* to form human-demon couples who would birth cambion children. Eventually, all my subjects would be cambions... That was my goal.”

The words were practically pouring out of her. However, the idea of Queen Nevia making cambions “while she was at it” was a bit unnerving...

“Nothing you said excuses you! You had no reason to join Iblis!” Anna exclaimed.

She swung Balamung toward Queen Nevia, but a multitude of black hands blocked its path, keeping the blade from reaching its target.

Queen Nevia brushed the fierce attack away and smiled sadly. “The Great One was lonely.”

This is bad... Ira mumbled.

It sure is, Ira. Queen Nevia and Iblis combined were a little bit stronger than Anna, even after her awakening. The two sides struggled against each other, but while Queen Nevia seemed at ease, Anna’s face was distinctly panicked.

I turned to my last hope—Dia.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“My liege... I apologize, but I doubt I could measure up against this evil. I also think that even trying would see me charmed...”

For a moment, I was shocked to hear that Dia could be affected by *Charm*, but then I remembered that I’d actually charmed her once before when I’d asked for her help. *Looks like I can’t rely on the strength of the Undyne.*

“Lord Iblis is a weak god,” said Queen Nevia. “He was cast from his realm and unable to live here without a barrier. He had no one, so he was forced to make the blight monsters his family...”

I looked around the floating island. The monsters had all fled from the fight between Queen Nevia and Anna. So these blighted things had been made because Iblis had desired companionship?

“It is fine. I have you, after all— You honor me, Lord Iblis.”

It was a conversation between two people coming from one mouth—the first half of that statement had come from Iblis, and the second, from Queen Nevia. It was really hard to tell them apart.

And even as they spoke—their tones so casual that they could’ve been

discussing the weather—Queen Nevia was casting saint rank spell after saint rank spell. The ground was being carved into by great furrows, and the whole area shook every so often. I was getting worried that we might fall from the sky.

Anna was breathing heavily, and I could tell she was unsteady on her feet.

B-But she's now awakened...she shouldn't be weaker...

Ira's voice made me realize just how bad the situation was, but I couldn't do anything about it.

"You are not as strong as I had heard," Queen Nevia lamented. "Well, allow me to close the book on this chapter."

Nevia's staff started spewing even more anima.

"The hero is in trouble!" Mel exclaimed.

"We must aid her," Johnnie said. Both of them leaped forward.

Momo was still out cold.

"Dia! Look after Momo!" I ordered.

"Of course, my liege!"

A step behind the others, I rushed after them.

Nevia giggled.

"Gobble them all up, Orthrus..."

Her spell was complete.

Pseudo-Summoning: Orthrus.

The spell called forward a huge hellhound with two heads. Orthrus was supposed to be a divine beast on another world. Th-This wasn't the real one, right?

It growled deep in its throats before leaping at Anna. Hundreds of black hands from Nevia's staff rained down at the same time. Several of them wrapped around Anna's limbs.

No!

We all rushed to protect her.

The beast howled—both Mel and Johnnie stopped in their tracks.

It's not the real Orthrus, just a temporary construct. Even so, it's a true representation of the beast—it's almost as strong as a divine rank spell. Mortals freeze just from hearing Orthrus's voice...

So it was that strong. The only ones still moving were me and...

"Run!"

Cain cut through the hands that were preventing Anna from moving. Suddenly, Orthrus's maw closed down on Cain.

"Gaaaah!"

I heard a distinctly unpleasant crack as Cain's armor broke.

Noah had made it. It was a divine relic. It shouldn't be so easily destroyed...

"Oh my, Cain. I hardly expected you to protect the Hero of Light. I thought you would understand, being a cambion like myself..."

"Stop it!" Anna screamed.

Sword of Light!

This was the biggest blade of light yet. Frankly, it was more like a laser—it blasted into Orthrus and exploded in a cross of pure radiance.

That's about as strong as when Sakurai defeated Zagan.

This attack probably utilized all of her strength. Surely it would have an effect...

After the dust cleared, I saw Orthrus—missing one head—and Nevla—unharmd. The head that had been biting down on Cain had fallen, and Cain was collapsed next to it, his armor half broken.

His ripped-up arms must've been painful, but the relic's abilities were already healing him. *Phew, the blessing from Noah is still in place.* Too bad he couldn't fight anymore.

Orthrus's remaining head growled, glaring hatefully at us.

"Sun Magic: Holy Flame!"

"Wind Elementals: Stormblade."

Mel and Johnnie's spells struck the hellhound. They didn't do much more than scratch it.

"Right Hand of the Elemental... Water Magic: Ice Frontier."

My ice barrier trapped it, but it didn't last long—the ice soon began to crack. The barrier was about to fall when Anna's next attack came in, taking out the beast's other head.

The hound fell to the ground and disintegrated into dust.

Had we...done it? I exchanged a look with Anna.

Then I saw that Mel and Johnnie had been captured by those black hands.

"Curses..."

"Apologies."

They're hostages now...

The situation was getting worse and worse.

“My, my. Orthrus was my trump card... What a shame.”

Even though she'd said that, Queen Nevia didn't seem even slightly concerned—she continued casting saint rank spells. Though Anna was unsteady on her feet, she repelled them. I tried to use my elemental arm to attack, but just couldn't get the magical output needed to damage her.

But still...

It's odd, remarked Ira. *Why isn't she threatening the hostages?*

Our enemy had Mel and Johnnie's lives quite literally in her grasp. It would be simple to threaten us with that.

Queen Nevia seemed to realize my and Ira's thoughts. She spoke with a smile. “I cannot kill my hostages. It would make *her* stronger, after all.”

So she knew about the specifics of the *Hero of Light* skill—it was strengthened in response to the bearer's emotions.

Anna was heaving for breath, unable to even speak.

Meanwhile, Nevia was still smiling gracefully. “Incidentally, Makoto Takatsuki, I won't lay a finger on you. After all, the hero loves you. Slipping and killing you would be awful.”

Ugh—she'd caught on to me. I'd been thinking about a suicide run.

“Hero of Light, you will be the first to die,” Queen Nevia proclaimed, her voice laden with disinterest. “Until then, the others will remain alive. Rest assured that you'll become the first sacrifice.”

She wasn't mocking Anna. If anything, Queen Nevia was taking every precaution. The fallen god and the Witch of Calamity had no weaknesses, and they also weren't letting their guard down.

They're strong...

“M-Makoto...”

I turned around to see Anna looking haggard. This was my fault... I'd pushed her into fighting.

Left Hand of the Elemental.

I ignored Ira's panicked yell.

Both of my arms were now elementals.

I should be able to cope with this. Probably.

Suddenly the mana flowing around me doubled. Breathing itself became more difficult. Mana was rampaging through my body, and I couldn't let up

on *Calm Mind* for even an instant.

Anna and I repelled the next dark spell. I had mana from the water elementals, while Anna had endless power from the sunlight. Iblis and Queen Nevia had endless power as well. We were at an impasse.

“It’s never-ending,” Queen Nevia remarked. Her words seemed out of place. “Did you know, historically, the Priestesses of the Sun and Moon have often been at odds?”

Why was she bringing this up now?

“What’s your point?” I asked, since Anna seemed too exhausted to speak.

“Well, Naya keeps picking cambions for her priestesses... That’s the reason. Because of that, her priestesses have no companions. I was the same. Even now, I fight alone.”

“Why does Naya pick cambions over humans?” I asked. *There must be some reason for it.*

Queen Nevia didn’t answer my question. She just carried on with her speech. “I am grateful to my goddess. I’m sure that if I’d been born a human, I wouldn’t have thought twice about defeating the demons and cambions. I would’ve been satisfied with that simple, flawed peace. But because I am one of the minority of cambions, reviled, I can aim for a world of *true* peace...”

“True peace?”

She wanted *peace*?

“Indeed. I can charm everyone on this planet and create a world of serenity ruled by Lord Iblis...”

“That’s...just domination, though.” Essentially, it would be conquering the world. It was very like Iblis.

“Wonderful, is it not?” she asked. “Those I bewitch are equal. They can feel happy no matter their situation. None are unfortunate. Do you not think it is the best possible world?”

“Then why are the people from my home all suffering?!” Anna screamed in rage.

Right—when we’d first met, Anna had been hopeless because of the loss of her mentor. The western continent was definitely far from peaceful.

“My apologies. Those of the western continent would have been charmed eventually.”

“Enough!” Anna yelled.

The queen’s smile widened. “You lost your concentration... I have you.”

“Damn!”

“Anna!”

The purpose of the conversation must have been to distract us. Several layers of black hands were now gripping Anna’s sword. I heard an ominous creak of metal.

“The holy sword!” Anna screamed.

Balamung suddenly bent sharply in the middle.

Again?!

Sasa had broken it in Great Keith—it seemed to spend more time broken than not!

Not the time, though! Anna has no weapon now.

I looked over to where Cain was passed out. *What about his?! Crap, I don’t see Noah’s sword... It’s not an option!*

“It is time to end this,” Queen Nevia declared.

Her staff began to gather miasma again. There was just as much of it as when she had summoned Orthrus. Maybe even more.

Shitshitshitshit!

Mel and Momo didn’t have swords, and Johnnie’s wasn’t good enough to harm her. Besides, Mel and Johnnie were both trapped by the hands.

What else was there?

I needed something on the level of a holy sword...

Are you forgetting me, Makoto?

The beautiful voice filled my empty heart like a drop of water after a day in the desert.

It felt like it had been *years* since I’d heard it...

Noah’s voice.

Huh? I heard Ira say in confusion, but I’d already started to act without even realizing it.

“Anna! Use this!”

I yanked the goddess’s dagger from my waist and passed it to the Hero of Light.

“Got it!”

She took the weapon. Relic or not, it appeared to be just a dagger. Honestly, it looked far weaker than any holy sword.

Queen Nevia paused for a moment, staring at the blade. “You are facing me with *that*?” Apparently, she agreed about its unassuming appearance.

Pseudo-Summoning: Cerberus.

A jet black hound with three heads manifested from her spell. *Another divine beast...*

“Kill the Hero of Light, *Cerberry*,” she said in a sing-song voice.

The beast rushed toward us—or rather, Anna—with unbelievable speed.

“Guh!”

Anna poured mana into the dagger and launched a *Sword of Light* at the beast. The blade of light it produced was tiny, but for an instant, it shone in all the colors of the rainbow.

Several people gasped in shock. The same attack from Balamung earlier had taken one of Orthrus’s heads. It hadn’t even scratched Nevia. However, this time...

The blade of light from Noah’s dagger...had blown away all three of Cerberus’s heads. In addition, the black hands protecting the merged body of Iblis and Queen Nevia had been cut through like paper.

Queen Nevia herself had been split in two.

“Gah...”

Coughing up blackened blood, Queen Nevia crumpled to the floor. Dark ichor covered the ground. She fell slowly, collapsing.

All of us were dumbfounded.

Anna, despite being the one who’d launched the attack, was the most surprised.

“That...was absurd... What is...that dagger?” Nevia murmured, her voice fading.

She was right. If I’d known the true power within Noah’s dagger, I would’ve handed it over from the start.

“Ugh! Haah...hah...haaah...”

Anna fell to her knees with a thud.

“Anna!” I yelped, rushing over to hold her up.

“I-I’m fine. It feels like all of my stamina and focus is gone, though... U-Um, Makoto, what is this dagger?”

“A relic from my goddess. I didn’t think it’d be *that* powerful, though...”

“I-I’ll return it. I don’t have the strength to use it again anyway.”

Gasping for breath, she handed it to me. We’d been saved by that dagger. And...saved by the voice telling me to use it. It had definitely been Noah’s.

“Noah? Noah, can you hear me?!” I yelled at the sky. “Thank you!”
There was no reply.

Maybe it’d been my imagination. That didn’t seem possible.

“Aah...that terrifying goddess who almost caused a Titanomachy all on her own. I assumed this relic was the same as Cain’s and let my guard down... That goddess truly loves you.”

I looked down at the dagger as I listened to Nevia’s pained voice. This blade with mana inside it was glowing the same beautiful blue as always. It was the first weapon I’d gotten in this world—a magic dagger that had saved me time after time.

“You...said...that *Noah* gave you the dagger...” Cain wheezed, staggering over.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

“I’ll...cope.”

His biggest wounds had been healed by the armor’s blessing, but the armor itself was half broken. The puncture marks left from Orthrus’s fangs looked wicked.

“So...your relic...seems special...” he said, a sad look on his face.

C’mon, Cain, I’m jealous of your sword and armor.

“Well, as far as I know, they’re made out of the same thing,” I told him.

“They are?”

“They look quite different,” Johnnie interjected.

That’s right, Ira said. Your relics are both made of adamantite, but not in the same way... But since I don’t have the same divinity as Noah, I can’t tell what has made them so different.

Huh. So Noah made my dagger stronger to compensate for the lack of raw material.

“Noah...thank you.” I kneeled where I was standing and offered my thanks to my goddess. Obviously, there was no reply. I’d just have to thank her properly when I was back in the future.

“Your...faith...is strong...Makoto...Takatsuki...”

“Queen Nevia...”

There was no way we could forget about her. Had she regenerated while our guard was down? We all looked cautiously her way.

However, the witch—with her body split in two—was gradually crumbling away into dust. It was honestly baffling that she could still talk.

“Good...for you. You saved...the world. I’m sure...your name...will be engraved in history...forever...”

She’s right. The danger to the world has passed, I heard Ira say.

So defeating the merged form of Iblis and Queen Nevia had saved the present. It didn’t feel right, though. This couldn’t be the end.

“Ira, what about Iblis reviving in the future?” I asked. The peace “now” was important, but the future was even more important. Had we managed to stop history from being modified?

Oh.

I heard a quiet “Tch...” from Queen Nevia.

C’mon, Ira, don’t forget about this kind of thing.

I-I didn’t forget! I just let it slip!

Should we really be entrusting history to her?

Umm...okay! Yup, I checked! History has been corrected up until the point where the Seven Nation Alliance fights the revived Great Demon Lord’s armies! In other words, it’s the same as before you— Huh? That’s okay, right?

“Seven Nations...” I murmured. “So Laphroaig is back?”

It had previously been the Six Nation Alliance—there was now an extra country. Well, whatever. The real issue was that Iblis had returned in the future, and that was true to the original history.

“So Iblis is reviving in my time.”

I glared at Queen Nevia, and she began to chuckle.

“Just so. We completed the *Rite of Reincarnation* yesterday. Lord Iblis has departed for the future.”

“Wait! We weren’t fighting him?! Then what have we been fighting?!” Mel roared in anger.

“A clone. Well, it was created from a portion of his soul, so it likely wasn’t that much weaker. It seems we deceived even Ira, though.”

Wh-What was that?!

They certainly had.

“Well, things are still on track,” I said. “Iblis was defeated by the Hero

of Light, abandoned the past, and reincarnated a thousand years from now. That should match the original path of history.”

Ira had confirmed that this was how it had happened. We’d kept history intact.

“Indeed, there was no facing the awakened Hero of Light,” Queen Nevia explained. “During the original history, Lord Iblis fled on the verge of death, but this time, he left on his own terms.”

“So... He’ll be even stronger?” I asked.

“He will. The true Lord Iblis is strong indeed.”

She was speaking smoothly once again. Though her form was breaking down, she sure was talkative. She also didn’t seem particularly concerned with the whole “losing her body” thing.

So...was *that* it? I asked the question that was on my mind.

“You went too, didn’t you?”

“Well...who could say?” she replied, grinning.

Yeah, that’d definitely been her plan. Queen Nevia would be in the future.

“Looks like we’ll be meeting each other again.”

I gazed at her unhappily. Her face twisted just as much.

“Makoto Takatsuki, you realize that *you* are one of the heroes of this world, yes? Anna is beautiful, Momo is precious, and they both adore you—why don’t you just live out a peaceful life in this era?”

“You don’t want me to go back to the future?”

“I don’t,” she said bluntly. “Please stay here. I don’t want to see you again.”

Well, that was harsh. But I guess it made sense she hated me.

“Well if you don’t cause any issues, I’m not going to come looking for you,” I reasoned. “But you’re planning something, aren’t you? Like charming a whole country.”

“Well, don’t you want the world to be at peace?”

She was shameless. Then again, as far as she was concerned, it was the right thing to do.

“I’ll find you,” I warned. “Assuming you keep it up, that is.”

As I was thinking about how difficult it would be to actually get to her, she offered a cryptic response.

“Oh? But we’ve already met.”

“Huh?” That came as a shock.

She grinned. “You already know my form in the future.”

Did I really? Had Queen Nevia reincarnated into one of the people I knew?

“Hey! Who—”

She just giggled over me, her melodic voice laden with meaning. Then, she faded away.

With that bombshell, Queen Nevia and Iblis—or his clone—were no more.

“What next?” Johnnie asked, looking between us. Iblis was gone. While he wasn’t completely defeated, this era would soon be at peace.

“I’ll go on a journey to defeat the other demon lords while I look for a way home,” I said.

Cleaning up, essentially. Iblis might’ve been gone, but the current state of things wasn’t the same as it had been. The other continents were still under the rule of the demon lords, and they needed freeing. *It would be great if I could get them all back here.*

While I was considering the idea, I noticed the pinched looks on the others’ faces.

“Elementalist, do you have some illness that will kill you if you don’t keep fighting?” Mel asked. She was treating me like I was diseased.

“I thought you’d be coming back to Labyrinthos...” Johnnie murmured. *Did he mean right now?*

Momo tugged on my sleeve. “Sir Makoto...you need to rest, please.”

Anna nodded. “That’s right, and we need to repair the holy sword.”

Ah, yeah—Anna’s blade was still bent.

“Well,” I said after a moment of pause. “Volf and Julietta will be worried, so we should go back to Labyrinthos.”

Everyone looked relieved.

“I wonder what I should do,” Cain mused. “I might have given up my position as a demon lord, but the heroes will still hate me.”

That was odd. Cain seemed to assume that he had nothing else to do.

“Well, you can come with me to the Seafloor Temple, right?” I asked.

There was a long silence.

“Thought you might say that,” he answered with a reluctant smile.

“We’ll get in without Leviathan noticing.”

“That’s not happening. The temple is on the beast’s back.”

“We just need a decoy to trick it...”

“We can’t use elemental magic there.”

“Ah, that’s right...”

Dia cleared her throat. “Um, my liege... That is a terrifying topic for idle chatter.”

Cain and I had been getting drawn into a debate when Dia nudged my shoulder. I quickly insisted that we were kidding.

Suddenly, Momo’s small figure approached me. “Sir Makoto... Why are you rushing so much?” she asked, looking uneasily up at me.

Rushing?

Was that what I looked like?

Of course it is. You defeated Iblis and now you’re planning to go after the others right away along with challenging one of the last dungeons. That would usually be unthinkable.

Ira’s statement made me realize what was going on.

“I guess it’s because I need to find a way back to the present...”

I hadn’t even meant to say it. That was probably why I was so loath to rest. I’d promised Lucy and Sasa that I’d return, but I hadn’t found a way to do it yet.

Well, it’s possible, I heard Ira mutter.

“Ira, there’s a way back?!” I yelled.

The others jumped at my shout.

Technically... You can do it now...probably.

She definitely didn’t sound confident.

“You mean...I can reincarnate like Iblis or Queen Nevia?”

I’d be a different person then.

You can’t reincarnate. The less mana someone has, the harder it is to distinguish them from others in the afterlife, so it gets harder to reincarnate them. It isn’t something we can do with your soul.

“I-I see...” So you couldn’t reincarnate at all unless you had enough mana.

Just leave it to me. It’ll take some doing, but I’ll explain how to get back.

“Thank you, Ira.”

I guess technically, I was done here. I let out a sigh. The finish line was in sight... It had been so long.

“Makoto!” Anna interrupted my thoughts. She grabbed my hand and fixed her sapphire eyes on mine. “U-Um...”

“What is it?”

She took a short breath and then silently stared at me for a while. Her face was cherry red.

“Would you...marry me?”

“Huh?”

“Anna! No getting ahead!”

“Well, you’ll be able to see him a thousand years from now!”

“Ugh...but...”

Well, I *had* told them that I would meet Momo in the future. Anna had looked distinctly conflicted when she’d heard that the Grandsage had taught me magic.

“Makoto, I won’t stop you from going back to the future. But before you do...”

“A-Anna, calm down...” The look on her face was scaring me.

“You said you loved me before the battle, didn’t you?”

“I-I did...”

I *had* said that. And with the way she was smiling now...I couldn’t respond any other way. W-Was this what they meant by men taking responsibility?

RPG Player apparently understood my feelings—a screen with letters floated up into the air.

Will you marry Anna Highland?

Yes

No

Even *RPG Player* was getting involved...

The Highland name had appeared out of nowhere as well. I suppose Saint Anna *had* founded the country.

You could marry her and stay here. It wouldn’t be a bad life, Ira added. I’m honestly saying this out of concern for you. You can be happy in this

era. You've done so much—you don't need to come back and fight Iblis again.

Her voice certainly sounded worried.

Anna was standing there, and Ira was expressing her true feelings.

The letters still floated in front of me.

All of this was making me hesitate.

I took a breath, then answered Anna's proposal.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki's Reunion

◇ Grandsage Momo's Perspective ◇

I let out a wide yawn. I was in my estate in the capital of Highland, Symphonia.

Lately, my sleep pattern had been two days awake and five asleep. Because I was a half-vampire, I gathered more mana when I was sleeping. Drinking people's blood would help me regain mana faster, but... I didn't feel like actively going after blood. Not unless it was *his*.

It had been a long time since Iblis's initial defeat. Anna had been part human, so obviously, she wasn't still here, but even a long-lived elf like Johnnie was gone now. There were very few creatures that could live for a thousand years. The undead like me, along with ancient dragons like Teacher Mel, were probably the only beings who could.

Now that I thought about it, it had been around three hundred years since I'd last seen her. She'd aided me until I'd become a full mage. Back then, I'd only been able to stand around uselessly, but now I felt much stronger.

Well, people *did* call me the strongest mage on the continent.

When she'd recognized me as a fully-fledged mage, Teacher Mel had said, "There is nothing more I can teach you now. Call yourself the White Grandsage from now on."

The "white" part of the title was apparently because I'd been *her* apprentice. When an apprentice graduated, it was customary to derive their title from their teacher's name.

In the last thousand years, Teacher Mel had become a legend on this continent called the Holy Dragon.

And yet, she was a demon lord's daughter...

Naturally, Sir Makoto wasn't around either. He was busy traveling to the future. Once Iblis had been defeated, he'd visited every area and chased the remaining demon lords out. He'd even tried periodically to conquer the

Seafloor Temple.

What had driven him to keep going without pause? Of course, the expeditions to the Seafloor Temple hadn't gone well—he'd always come back in a mood. Cain had joined him but had vanished at the same time as Sir Makoto.

“Bye, Momo. I'll see you in the future.”

I could still remember his voice. He'd said those words while stroking my hair.

It had been nearly a thousand years since then.

I want you to say my name again...

Recently, I'd been dreaming a lot about back then—about the era of darkness, full of demons and monsters. Dreaming about the terrifying times...but also the times spent traveling with Sir Makoto.

I missed it. I wanted to be alongside him again. I wanted to speak to him. I wanted to *hear* him. But...I couldn't.

I felt the weight settle on my heart.

Deciding to go get some air, I left the estate.

I sighed. It was the middle of winter, and if I'd been human, the cold would've felt like knives cutting into my skin. Fortunately (or unfortunately), being undead meant I felt nothing. The moon was full. People called that an ill omen, thanks to Nevla back in the past.

They called her the Witch of Calamity now. She was planning on reincarnating in this era alongside Iblis.

It was a real bother. She'd caused so much trouble back in the past.

I felt indignant as I wandered through the castle gardens.

“Grandsage?” I heard from behind me.

I hadn't been expecting anyone to be around at this time of night. Her blonde hair shone in the moonlight. I gazed into her clear blue eyes.

“Noelle,” I said.

This was the beautiful second princess of Highland.

They look so alike...

She was the Priestess of the Sun, and also Anna's spitting image. I could definitely understand the rumors of her being the saint's reincarnation.

“What are you doing up?” I asked.

She fixed me with an uneasy stare. “I couldn’t sleep, so I was praying at the cathedral. I wanted to ask...will Iblis really be back in the next few years? And...what should I do then?”

The priestesses of every country had simultaneously been told of Iblis’s return.

Since then they had been concocting a secret plan—mainly focused on Highland—to combat the threat. This strategy had been dubbed the Northern Front Plan. Though there had been a lot of dissent between the countries, we were now all on the same page for Iblis’s return.

With that said...

“That’ll come in the future. Don’t think about it too hard right now,” I advised.

“Right...” Noelle’s head slumped.

She must be uneasy. Saint Anna from the savior’s party had been the founding hero of Highland. Noelle had the weight of being considered her reincarnation. It was too much pressure for a girl in her teens to bear.

“Um...would you tell me about how the savior fought?” Noelle asked.

I sighed. “Again?”

As far as the public was concerned, I simply had the powers and memories of the first Grandsage. In truth, though, I was an immortal vampire who was actually the original Grandsage.

Only the royal family and some of the nobility knew that.

“Fine, I’ll tell you about Bifrons’s defeat,” I conceded.

“Right!” Her eyes were sparkling as she looked at me.

But all I actually did was watch while Sir Makoto and Anna beat him...

It pained me slightly. Still, I’d talk about it as much as Noelle wanted if it would make her feel better.

I added some dramatization as I spoke of what happened. Time continued to pass.

Eventually, news that we had visitors from another world came to us. The second Hero of Light was one of them. There were others as well, each with strong skills.

Yet none of those who came to Highland were Sir Makoto.

That was okay, though. I was still considering—considering how I

would meet him again.



“Um, you are personally heading for Labyrinthos?”

“I am. Is there a problem with that?”

I rarely left my estate, so when I went to the castle and informed the king and prime minister of my plans, both of them had tense looks on their faces.

“No! Not at all! It just seems that, blight dragon or not, this is not something we should bother you with, and—”

I cut them off. “I’ve made my decision. If you are against it, you are welcome to try and stop me.”

I looked around the room, meeting royal and noble gazes alike. Everyone here knew that I’d been part of the legendary party.

Normally, I would never use the prestige of my title like that, but I did so on occasion.

“I-I look forward to working with you, Grandsage.”

That had come from the current Hero of Light, Ryoustake Sakurai.

A hero from another world.

He’s strong... I could tell by the aura around him—he had far more latent potential than Anna’d had. He had only just arrived in this world though, so he had no idea how to use any of his power.

“It’s your first fight,” I told him. “If there are issues, I will assist.”

“Thank you.”

He was a polite young man.

“Grandsage...are you really going to Labyrinthos?” a noble asked.

“You are our strongest asset. Please, recons—”

“This conversation is over,” I said flatly. I would be joining the Hero of Light on the campaign to wipe out the blight dragon.

“Momo and I first met when the Hero of Light went to Labyrinthos,” Makoto had said. There was no way I was letting that future change.

Finally... I can finally meet him again...

It felt almost like I could feel my heart pounding, even though it didn’t beat at all.

Ultimately, the Hero of Light defeated the blight dragons handily. There

had been some close calls, but he had done well on his first test.

And... I had seen *him*.



“Excuuuse us...”

Dark hair, dark eyes, and a petite frame. The adventurer who entered my tent seemed almost unreliable.

Ah... I felt almost on the verge of tears. It was all I could do to keep it inside.

Finally... I finally get to meet you again...

I had gotten the Hero of Light to summon his friend, the otherworlder called Makoto Takatsuki. He was the one said to have the lowest stats and least skills out of any of the otherworlders. That was why Highland hadn’t asked for him. Not only that, but none of the other countries had wanted him to fight for them either.

He’d been forgotten in the Water Temple.

By the time I learned about any of this, he’d been in this world for quite some time. Frankly, when I’d first heard the reports, I’d doubted it was really him.

But...

It is him...

There was no doubt about it. He looked just as I remembered.

“Come this way. Talking like this is difficult.”

I did my best to stop my voice from shaking. The Sir Makoto I remembered had been bolder—this version of him seemed nervous and lacking in confidence.

Right...he doesn’t know me yet...

Remembering that helped me calm down somewhat. Then, I noticed the two cute girls behind him.

Aah, he has girls with him again...

It irritated me slightly. I used *Appraisal* to see just what kind of girls they were—one was a half-demon and the other was a lamia. The half-demon was even Johnnie’s descendant!

Knowing that, I couldn’t just turn them away...

I gave the redhead a gift to help with her mana control, and I advised the

lamia on how to better use the *Transform* skill she was clearly struggling with.

That's me sending salt to my enemies...

This was a saying I'd heard from the otherworlders. It'd come from Sir Makoto's homeland, and it meant that one should help their enemies rather than taking advantage of their weaknesses.

Despite all that, seeing him after a millennium was the best feeling in the world. Now I just wanted to talk to him more.



After that, I took advantage of every chance I could to see him. That said, I *was* the Grandsage, so making time for him was rather difficult.

Every time I saw him, he was stronger.

Before I knew it, he had an Undyne at his side and was traveling to country after country, saving people.

Then, he defeated a demon lord. He was becoming the man I knew.

Eventually...he set off for the past.

He'd saved me back when I was a human. I'd fallen in love with him.

And I'd kept that love...over each one of these thousand years. Each and every one. Forever and ever and ever.

I approached the dark coffin in my estate.

"When...will you wake up...?" I muttered listlessly.

I opened the coffin, revealing Sir Makoto sleeping in his ice magic. The ice was protected by an Undyne—I wouldn't be able to melt it.

"It's...already been a thousand years..."

I touched the ice. It was hard, lacking any of the warmth of light.

"When will you wake up?"

There was no response.

Or rather, there shouldn't have been.

"Little one? Are you crying?"

I jolted. Suddenly, a beautiful woman—one who looked almost like a blue-skinned doll—appeared in front of me.

I recognized her, of course.

"Dia...?"

"Look at you," she said teasingly, gesturing to the Grandsage's clothes.

“Barely any time has passed, and you’re wearing a really fancy outfit.”

“What part of it is barely?!” I demanded. It’d been a *thousand years*! Elementals really had no sense of time!

But right now, none of that mattered.

If Dia is here, then...

I quickly looked back at the coffin.

“A-Ah...”

The almost-eternal ice had vanished without a trace.

I could hear the thump of his heart in his chest.

Slowly...ever so slowly...his eyes opened.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective (One Thousand Years Ago) ◇

Makoto Takatsuki, order the Undyne to freeze you. You’ll be able to wake up in the future.

Ira’s instructions weren’t exactly the most precise.

“Cryosleep...”

It wasn’t that I’d never thought of it. But was that really the only option?

The scariest thing was that I’d be defenseless while I was sleeping.

Would I even be able to wake up in the future?

Don’t worry! Just have Momo keep watch while you’re sleeping.

“Have Momo keep watch?” I repeated.

The girl shot me an uneasy glance. “What do you want me to do...?”

“Momo, I’m in your hands!”

“Uh, r-right! I don’t know what’s happening, but I’ll do it!” she replied firmly.

She was a good girl. I’d need to explain the plan to her properly at a later time.

“So how am I waking up?” I asked.

You’ll need to get the Undyne to wake you, said Ira.

“Momo can’t do it?”

She won’t be able to break the Undyne’s spell. You’ll either need to wake up yourself or have the Undyne do it.

I see.

“Dia, can you wake me up in a thousand years?”

“I don’t know whether I have a great grasp on time... A thousand years is

about how long it's been since Titanomachy, right?"

That was fifteen million years ago.

Silence.

Elementals really didn't have any sense of time. Fifteen million years in the past—that was considered to be a time of legend. If she took that long to wake me, it wouldn't even be funny.

Fine, I'll teach you some Fate Magic. You can put a timer on the spell.

"There's a spell that does that?" Dia asked.

Not yet. I'm making one just for you.

"Thank you for your efforts."

Ira giggled. *You'd better appreciate it!*

She personally taught me the spell, and then...

The day came.

Johnnie and Mel were obviously here, but so were Volf, Julietta, and the others from the dungeon town. Momo was crying continuously, so I felt really bad. And Anna...was angry.

"We could have been together for longer," she'd pouted. But, I'd told her ahead of time, and she'd agreed. In the end, she sent me off with a smile.

"I'll be going," I said to them.

This was farewell to everyone in the past.

"Makoto...you remember your promise, don't you?" Anna asked.

"I do."

"If you forget, I won't let you get away with it!"

She planted a long farewell kiss on my lips.

Her sad smile and Momo's crying face were the last things I remembered seeing before I drifted off into a thousand-year sleep.



I slowly opened my eyes. There was an orange light, and a dimly lit ceiling filled my field of view.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see candle flames flickering.

Right next to me, someone was crying.

"Sir...Ma...koto..."

It was a small, white-haired girl.

Momo? This wasn't the Momo I remembered, though. This was the Grandsage who'd seen me off from the cathedral in Highland.

But the way she was pressing her face into my chest and crying...that was all Momo. She'd been waiting for me this whole time.

My body felt heavy—it was a trial to even open my mouth. I'd been sleeping for a thousand years, so that only made sense.

I needed to tell her though—I needed to thank her.

“Momo...” I sounded hoarse. “I'm back...”

“I've been waiting...so long...” Momo's voice sounded strangled.

“Thank you,” I said, moving my heavy arm to stroke her hair softly.

I was back in the present now.



Epilogue: Founding

◇ Saint Anna's Perspective ◇

Makoto had traveled back to the future.

I barely had time to be upset about it, though.

“Lady Anna!”

“Saint!”

“Queen!”

“Long live the Queen!”

After we'd defeated Iblis and driven the demon lords back to the northern continent, the people who'd lived in hiding were able to gather in the sunlight and form countries. One of these new nations was Highland.

I'd become its queen. It wasn't like anyone else was going to do it.

As for the others who had fought against Iblis...

Johnnie...was traveling the world.

“Wait, Chief!” Julietta panicked. “What about the town? Who's going to bring the elves together?!”

“I leave it to you, Julietta.”

“Th-That's not fair!”

“The Great Forest will be perfect for the elves. Perhaps you can call it Springroque. Create a country for our people. I'm sure everyone will follow if you lead.”

“The elves are one thing, but what about all the other races living in the town?”

“Oh, right. Their settlements are scattered in the wilderness, and many of them want to band together into a country. I'll be helping them,” Volf said.

Julietta looked uncertain. “Are you sure?”

“There are lots of vicious sand dragons in the area. The fate priestess said a hero should go with them. The country will be called Great Keith.”

“And you’ll be its king?”

“Technically. Not like I’m cut out for it, though...”

“Then I’ll have to do it.” Julietta let out a sigh. “Aww, I don’t wanna be a queen.”

“All you need to do is set a term and appoint the next chief,” Johnnie reasoned. “Elves are long-lived—we shouldn’t have the same person leading for too long.”

“But you’ve led here for around two hundred years,” she protested, her eyes hooded.

She didn’t tell him to stay, though. Johnnie had led the various races since Julietta was a child, so she wanted to let him follow his dreams. So did the town as a whole.

Johnnie gave his farewells and then vanished.

Almost like Makoto.

It had been several months since then.

“Saint Anna, I apologize for the late hour.”

I had finally finished my work for the day. A guest had arrived while I was resting in my room.

“Lady Estelle...” I said. My eyes flicked to the person next to her. “And, who are you?”

Estelle was petite, but there was an even smaller girl at her side. Her eyes were a clear blue, and her hair was the color of the sky. She was adorable.

“This is the new water priestess. I brought her here to greet you.”

“I-I’m glad to meet you, Saint! I’m Sonia from the village of Roses! I heard Goddess Eir’s voice and now I’m her priestess!” The girl’s voice was nervous, and she dropped her head in a bow.

“I see. I’m Anna. Nice to meet you, Sonia.”

I took her hand and smiled.

“I was thinking she could establish a country that follows Eir. Is that acceptable?” Estelle asked.

“Of course.”

We hadn’t been able to pray properly to our goddesses so far. We’d planned to construct temples and churches for worship—this would set the framework for us all to live better lives. The western continent was

particularly blessed by the goddesses, after all.

But there were so many other things we needed to do first. It made me want Makoto back.

My feelings must have shown on my face.

“Lady Anna, have you been working too much?” Estelle peered at my face, clearly concerned.

“Huh? No, not at—”

“Working too much will ruin you,” she interrupted. “Don’t imitate Ira or Makoto, okay? Oh, I know! I have an idea.”

A teasing smile curled her lips upward.

“Um...an idea?” I asked.

She giggled. “I’ll visit again tomorrow. Do the urgent things, but make the others help with everything else.”

With that, she and the other priestess left.

What was going on?



Splish.

It was a pleasant sound.

“Anna, Teacher Mel, the water is great!”

“Indeed it is, little one. Thank you for having us, Hero.”

“Thank you both for joining me,” I told the two of them.

Momo smiled. “Well, I wanted a break from training, so I was glad for the invitation.”

“You’re still going to be training here,” Lady Helemmelk told her.

“Whaaa?!” Momo whined. “Can’t I have a rest day from time to time?!”

“Do you think you’ll catch up to *him* like that? He trained all day every day.”

There was a pause.

“And he was messed up in the head for it! Don’t lump me in with him!”

“Well, he *did* train too much,” Lady Helemmelk admitted.

It was nice to hear them talking again. This almost made it feel like we were all traveling again.

This village was apparently called Macallan. The fate priestess had told about this place, which had a natural hot spring. “Lady Anna,” she’d said.

“You should rest. If we leave you to your own devices, I’m sure you’ll barely sit down! So, I have called for reinforcements—Lady Momo and Lady Helemmelk. We’ll get you to relax!”

And now, Lady Helemmelk, Momo, and I were in the pool.

The water priestess soon popped by to check on us. It seemed that she ran the place.

“Saint, is the water okay?” she asked.

“Lovely. Why don’t you join us, Sonia?” I asked.

“No! I couldn’t possibly!”

She seemed overwhelmed and didn’t take me up on the offer. Honestly, I’d rather not be treated as anything special, though...

Oh well.

“Time to get out!” Lady Helemmelk stood with a splash.

Damn, her figure really was amazing.

“Me too...” Momo said, also standing up. “I’m getting lightheaded.”

“What about you?” Lady Helemmelk asked me.

“I’ll soak for a little longer.”

The two of them walked off, and Momo had to practically jog to keep up with the taller woman’s longer stride.

They’re like mother and daughter... I thought with a smile. Mother and daughter...husband and wife...marriage...

I looked down at the silver ring around my finger.

It matched Makoto’s.

Makoto...

We’d had a small ceremony with the group we’d traveled with. Remembering it brought a smile to my face.

“Ah...I’m feeling kinda dizzy,” I murmured.

I’d stayed in the water for too long. I left the pool and headed for Lady Helemmelk and Momo.

“Oh, you’re done. Try this! It’s delicious.”

Lady Helemmelk passed me an ice-cold glass of a white drink.

“Is that...milk?”

I’d never tried it during Iblis’s rule. The demon lords hadn’t farmed cows or sheep—they’d farmed humans instead. I took a drink from the glass of milk and let its coolness flow down my throat.

“Oh...it’s delicious.”

“Phwaah, I’m alive again!” Momo exclaimed after draining her own glass.

“C’mon, little one, you’re a vampire. You’re not alive at all,” Lady Helemmelk interjected.

“It’s only old people that get insistent on that sort of thing.”

“Oh-ho... So that’s triple the training today.”

“Abuse! Oppression!”

The teacher and apprentice were a lively pair. It was a pleasant, heartwarming sight.

Despite her complaints, Momo continued her training. She was getting ready for the distant future when Iblis returned—she wanted to be able to fight alongside Makoto.

Makoto...

We’d won, but he’d gone back to save the world again.

All I can do...is establish a solid country. I have to make sure he doesn’t lose.

Being all emotional wasn’t going to help.

Mel turned to me. “You look worried, Hero. You should relax while you’re here.”

“She’s right, Anna! Rest.”

“Lady Helemmelk, Momo...”

I’d worried both of them.

“If you are done bathing, I have a meal ready for you,” said Sonia. “This way.”

Sonia guided us to a spread of food. The dishes mostly utilized fish caught in the nearby lake—Lake Chimay.

“These salt-broiled fish are delicious.”

“The fried shrimp are so crispy.”

Lady Helemmelk and Momo were chattering as they enjoyed their food.

I’ve never seen a salad like this... I put a bite into my mouth, savoring the fresh flavors. *Delicious.*

“Is it to your liking, Saint?” Sonia asked.

“It is! It’s wonderful.”

“The freshness is due to how clean the water is around here. Because of our environment, the food is always tasty.”

“With the hot spring and the local cuisine, this might end up as a good tourist spot,” Lady Helemmelk remarked. She was enjoying an alcoholic beverage that was apparently made by fermenting rice.

“Right! The Priestess of Fate said that too!” Sonia exclaimed. “I’m going to make Roses a country that welcomes all travelers.”

The young water priestess was cheerful as she talked about her plans.
I’m sure Roses will end up being a fine nation.

Right—hadn’t Makoto said that he’d been the Hero of Roses?

Makoto... My mind was fixed on the man I loved, even as he’d traveled far away.

Save the future.

I’d do everything I could here.

I stretched and drank the rest of my drink, which was a fruit liquor of some variety. I’d rest properly for a bit and then make Highland into the best country I could.

That was my vow.

Afterword

This is Isle Osaki. Thank you for reading volume eleven of *Zero Believers*.

We've finished the past millennium arc now. This is the longest book so far. There were so many characters: the nine demon lords, Iblis, and the people living on the demon continent. In fact, there were so many of them that we couldn't illustrate everyone. Anyway, it was a *lot*.

One of my favorite characters was Bifrons. He was in volume six, but the past era was his real time to shine. I put more effort into his battle scene than any other I've written. I'd wanted to see an illustration of him when he'd first appeared, but the others had taken precedence. So, I'm glad he got a proper illustration this time. There was also Erinyes, who's in the work set in this same world, *Kougekiryoku Zero Kara Hajimeru Kenseitan (The Master Swordsman Starts with Zero ATK)*. She's featured front and center on its cover, so I have an illustration of her as well.

Tam-U, the illustrations of Anna and Momo were the best! Hakuto Shiroy, I loved the picture of Roses Castle. I need to thank S for being my editor for more than one series. Finally, I want to thank all of you readers. I hope you will continue to enjoy *Zero Believers* in the future.

Bonus Short Stories

The Goddesses' Chat

"Hmm..."

The scratching sounds of a pen filled the room. Said room was mostly pink and rather fancy. It was also an office belonging to the Goddess of Fate—Ira.

The goddess let out a sigh.

"Maybe I should take a break."

Considering how close the western continent was geographically to the demon continent, Ira—who was in charge of the western continent—was always busy.

She'd already been awake for seven days nonstop.

"Hmm, making coffee's a pain," she grumbled.

"Yo, Irrie! ☆"

"We came to hang out!"

Suddenly, two other goddesses appeared in the room.

One of them was a blonde who seemed rather flighty—it was Ira's older sister, Eir, the Goddess of Water.

The other goddess had hair that sparkled silver like the stars. She was a wicked deity who was supposed to be sealed away in the Seafloor Temple. This was Noah of the Titanea.

"Eir, Noah?! What are you doing here?"

"I had nothing better to do," Noah said casually.

A deep furrow appeared on Ira's brow. "Well, *I'm* busy! Go away!" Even though they were higher gods, she couldn't help but shout angrily at them.

"Come on, Irrie," Eir soothed. "Noah's actually just worried about Mako. Let us know how he's doing in the past."

Eir glanced at Noah, but Noah just looked away. Judging by the look on Noah's face, Eir was right on the money.

Ira sighed. “Fine, if *you’re* asking...” She snapped her fingers and a screen appeared in the air. Projected upon it was a black-haired, dark-eyed youth of rather average looks.

“It’s Mako!”

“Huh, he seems well.”

Both Eir and Noah peered at the image with interest.

The scene showed him training his water magic, and the overall image remained unchanging.

“Mako’s still training,” said Eir. “He hasn’t changed, even in the past.”

“Right? He’s done practically nothing else,” Ira said in exasperation before turning to the third goddess in the room. “There, you’ve seen him now, so you should be hap—”

Suddenly, she noticed the smirk on Noah’s face. The goddess was practically grinning.

Ira felt an uneasy stirring in her chest.

Eir had said that Noah wanted to come here to check on Makoto because she was worried.

However, her expression looked more like...

“Hey, Noah?” Ira asked.

“Hm? What’s up?”

As Noah turned around, Noah’s face settled into a bemused look, as vexingly beautiful as ever.

She looks like a plan of hers has just gone off without a hitch, Ira thought.

But there was no way. Noah was sealed away in the Seafloor Temple, rendered powerless.

Ira still couldn’t let it go. She went to question Noah further, but—

Ding dong.

“Irrie, what’s that noise?” Eir asked.

“Ack!” exclaimed Ira. “Makoto Takatsuki will be here soon!”

“Oh, maybe we can say hi.”

“Of course you can’t!” she yelled.

If the two of them met Makoto here, it would break history more than it was already broken...and it would be even longer before Ira could sleep.

“Out! Get out!” Ira ushered them along and was once again alone in the room.

Her face...

Has she concocted some sort of scheme?

“No way!” Ira shook her head, trying to dispel those thoughts. If she kept worrying about irrelevant things, she would never finish her work.

After all, *no one* could free Noah from her seal.

The goddess started working once again.

The Two Apostles Chat

The campfire snapped and crackled. Cain and I were camping out on one of the Habhain islands under a beautiful sea of stars.

Several skewers of fish were cooking around the fire. They smelled delicious.

“Guess they’re about done,” I said. “You having some?”

There was a long pause before Cain answered.

“Sure.”

I held one out to him and he took it with an exhausted expression. The second “Seafloor Temple Reconnaissance Tour” must have worn him out.

I bit into my skewer. Flavorful juice flowed out of the meat, filling my mouth with flavor.

In this era, the only seasoning we had was salt, but the fresh fish was well and truly appreciated by our tired bodies.

“Yo, Cain—bread.” I tossed some over to him.

“H-Hey! Don’t just throw it out of nowhere!”

I’d brought it with me from the temple. Honestly, I would’ve preferred onigiri or something, but that wasn’t an option in the past. Bread and grilled fish *was* a somewhat odd combination, but it still hit the spot after a day spent adventuring.

I glanced over and saw that Cain wasn’t eating.

“You don’t like it?” I asked.

“No, it’s good.”

I didn’t sense that he was lying. It seemed more like he was slowly savoring his food.

“You seem down,” I remarked.

“Well...” He shot me a glare. “I think it’s weirder that you *don’t* seem down. Especially after we had that many monsters around us.”

“Ah, yeah, that kraken swarm was kinda scary.”

“No one said anything about us having to deal with monsters like that in order to get to the temple.” He gave a short huff of laughter. “I never thought I’d be adventuring like this while I was her apostle.”

“I figured that, for an apostle of Noah, trying to get to the temple would be an obvious priority... Oh, I guess you didn’t know where it was.”

“Right. But I didn’t try to find it either. She said I didn’t need to, so I obeyed.”

“Why not? Your goddess is trapped there, so of course you’d try and get to her prison. Though, she *did* tell me that I shouldn’t bother pushing myself.”

“You...don’t pay much heed to what the goddesses say, do you?” Cain asked incredulously. He was looking at me like I was a complete enigma.

“Well, it’s one of the last dungeons, isn’t it? Of course I’d want to beat it.” If I gave up on something like that, I’d never be able to call myself a gamer.

“When I said I wanted to do this,” Cain continued, “the other demon lords were all against it.”

“Oh, how so?”

“Well, Lady Erinyes—she was the one to invite me to their ranks—asked ‘Are you an idiot?’ as soon as I told her.”

“She’s like that?”

Erinyes sounded easier to get along with than I’d thought. Well, that was probably because Cain was one of them.

While we chatted, we picked all of the skewers clean. The conversation between us went a lot further than it had yesterday. *Having a connection with your fellow adventurers is important.*

Though, this “fellow adventurer” is a demon lord...

“Hopefully we get to meet Leviathan tomorrow!” I exclaimed.

“You’re really going up against that thing?” Cain asked uneasily.

“We’ll figure something out,” I said optimistically.

Of course, the two of us would soon find out just how ridiculous the Divine Beast Leviathan actually was.

But that was a story for another day.

Celebrations

“Cheers!” everyone chorused as they clinked their glasses.

We were *outside* Labyrinthos.

After defeating Iblis, we’d come back to the dungeon town. Now that there was practically zero chance of the demon lords attacking the continent, the citizens didn’t have to hide away anymore. And so, we’d moved from the middle layer of the dungeon to outside. The town had put together a massive feast.

“Sir Makoto!” Johnnie exclaimed. I’d never seen him so drunk and excitable. “Before you return to the future, won’t you take one of my daughters?!”

“Um, well...”

“Makoto is marrying me!” Anna cried out, jumping into the conversation.

“Well, that isn’t an issue, Lady Anna. A hero should spread their bloodline as much as possible!”

Anna faltered. “W-Well...”

“Johnnie, having Anna as a wife is enough for me,” I said.

He grumbled in disappointment. *Frankly, I’m scared of what will be waiting for me in the future if I marry any more women.* His sour mood didn’t last long—he soon cheered up and joined the other townspeople in their drinking. He’d led them for over a century, and after all this time, the weight on his shoulders was finally getting lighter.

As long as he’s enjoying himself...

“Y-You! Elementalist!” A redheaded man approached, yelling at me. Though, his voice *was* shaking a bit. “I’ll take mother back this time!”

I remember him...maybe.

Dia suddenly appeared next to me. “Oh, do you want to become an ice sculpture again, lizard?”

“Eep! Undyne?!”

“Ah, right!” The realization had just dawned on me. “You’re the dragon who picked a fight down in Labyrinthos.”

Just then, someone else approached.

“Come on, Elementalist, don’t pick on the children.”

It was Mel.

“He said he was taking you back,” I told her.

“Oh?”

There was a glint in her eye as she turned to the man.

“Mother! Please come back to us!”

“But the elemental is going to the southern and floating continents next, right?” she asked, directing the tail end of the question to me.

I nodded. “Yup.”

“Then someone has to go with you,” Mel reasoned. She turned to the other dragons nearby. “Would any of you take my place?”

“W-Well...” mumbled the redhead.

“There’s also a distinct possibility we could run into the remaining demon lords like Erinyes or Barbatos,” Mel pointed out.

The man was silent for a moment, then said, “I’ll pass,” before turning and leaving.

I felt kind of bad. “Are you sure, Mel?”

She grinned at me. “You’re awfully humble for a man who defeated the Great Demon Lord.”

“Anna was the one to do it.”

“What?! If you hadn’t been there, we would’ve all been wiped out! That divine rank spell was superb!” She cackled.

“Teacher Mel is in a really good mood. She drank a lot more than usual.”

I noticed that Momo had come up to my side.

“Where’d you run off to?” I asked.

“There were drunkards wherever I went, so I escaped.”

“Then have a more relaxed drink with me.”

“With you?!” Momo exclaimed. “Gladly!”

“I’ll come too!” said Anna, who’d also just strolled over.

The three of us moved away from the noise. My eyes fell on a knight wearing black armor. He was sitting on a big rock.

“Cain?”

“Oh...Makoto.”

“What’re you doing?”

“I shouldn’t be here,” he muttered.

He hadn’t managed to get into the swing of the celebration yet.

“What are you on about?” I asked. “We couldn’t have won without

you.”

But even as I said that, his expression remained dark. I was trying to work out what to say next when Volf and Julietta appeared. They both went over to Cain.

“What’re you doing here?” Volf demanded.

“Yeah!” Julietta exclaimed. “C’mon, you saved them—let’s go drink.”

The two of them took Cain by the arms and pulled.

“I-I killed—”

“Olga wouldn’t worry about the little things like that.”

“She wanted peace more than anyone☆”

Gradually, the two of them dragged him off.

This is the same man who would be known as the “hero-killer” a thousand years from now? Yeah...the future’s definitely changed.

“Hey, Sir Makoto.”

“Makoto.”

Whoops, I couldn’t just leave Anna and Momo hanging. The two beauties nudged at me from either side.

I laughed lightheartedly, and we all toasted to a peaceful world.

Makoto and Anna — Wedding Rings

It’d been several days since the battle with the Great Demon Lord.

“Makoto! I want matching rings!” Anna said out of nowhere.

Well, since we’d agreed to get married, maybe that didn’t count as “out of nowhere.”

Rings, though... She was definitely a girl at heart.

There was just one problem.

“No one around here sells rings, right?”

The shops in the dungeon town were all for weapons, armor, and tools. Survival was everything in this era, so they wouldn’t be making accessories.

“That’s...right.”

She slumped. It hurt to see her so sad.

My actions had all been for the greater good of defeating Iblis, but I’d still stolen her first kiss, declared my love, and now I was leaving her to go back to the future. I couldn’t justify making it worse, could I?

Anna wanted rings, and I wanted to give her what she wanted.

“Let’s look for some!” I said.

“Huh?”

Her eyes went wide, and she broke out into a smile.

“Okay!”

And thus, the search for our rings had begun.



“Hmm, as far as I know, there are no craftsmen within the town who can make rings,” Johnnie said. “My apologies.”

He’d been our first port of call. Since he’d led the town for so long, I’d thought he might know a guy. Unfortunately, it seemed that wasn’t the case. Our best chance had gone up in flames.

“Don’t worry about it, Johnnie,” I said. “Sorry for bothering you.”

Suddenly, Momo and Dia walked up.

“Oh, what’re you talking about?”

“What’s wrong, my liege?”

I explained the situation, and Momo immediately started protesting.

“What?! No fair, Anna! I want one too!”

“N-No!” exclaimed Anna. “They’re wedding rings for the two of us!”

“No fair. I wanna match too!”

“That’d mean Makoto was marrying two people, Momo,” Anna explained.

“That’s fine. He already has lovers in the future.”

“But he hasn’t done anything with them.”

“Right, I’ve checked over and over, but it still says zero—”

I cut them off. “All right, you two, *enough*.” We could do that sort of stuff when the world was at peace... And besides, it wasn’t like I could have imagined that I’d be time traveling.

Dia soon spoke up. “What about this, my liege?”

She presented a sparkling aqua-blue ring. It had a gorgeous snow pattern all across the surface.

“Pretty...”

“It’s sparkling...”

Anna and Momo were both taken in with it. I’d never seen such a pretty

ring, not even in the future.

“Thanks, Dia,” I said. “I’ll try it on.”

I took it from her and slipped it onto my ring finger. The size was exactly right. It was perfect...except...

“It’s made of ice...” In other words, it was—literally—freezing cold.

My water magic meant that this wouldn’t be a problem for me, but Anna would probably struggle. Besides, since it was made of magic, it would require a constant mana flow to maintain its integrity.

That’s not happening unless you’re an elemental with infinite mana...

This wasn’t a ring that humans could use.

“It feels like it’d be difficult for me to keep up,” Anna commented.

“Wow, so pretty. I want one too.”

While Anna seemed to deflate, Momo was perfectly happy to wear it. Momo was undead, so an ice-cold ring wouldn’t be a problem for her. Apparently, I’d found a way to cheer her up without even trying.

But still, Anna’s ring was the main thing here, and we still hadn’t gotten anything.

“*She’s* our last bet.”

“Right. We should ask Lady Helemmelk what she thinks.”

Anna and I exchanged glances. I wasn’t expecting Mel to be up-to-date on human rings, but it was still worth asking her.



“Hm? A human ring? I can make a simple one at least.”

She could?!

Anna and I both uttered a confused “Huh?” We hadn’t expected that.

“R-Really?!” Anna asked excitedly.

“Don’t expect too much. I can use metal magic and some mithril to make something, though.”

“Hooray!” Anna bounced with joy.

“What kind of design do you want?” Mel asked.

“Hmm, I’m not sure.”

Anna and I began chattering away. Mel soon interrupted us.

“Don’t ask for something too complicated.”

Eventually, we settled on something patterned after the leaves of the

world tree. This tree was situated in Anna's birthplace, right at the center of the floating continent. It was symbolic of peace and tranquility in the world.

"Human accessories are so complex..." Mel grumbled, struggling with our request.

A few hours later, she handed us the fruits of her labor.

"Done!" she exclaimed. "I'm exhausted! I'm going to sleep!"

She immediately did just that.

Resting in our palms were two matching rings. Anna and I looked at each other.

I slipped the ring, engraved with a motif of the world tree, onto her ring finger. She did the same for me.

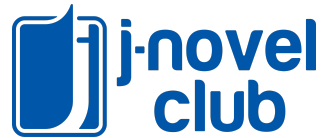
They fit shockingly well.

Our eyes met again.

"Makoto... I'm so happy. I'll treasure this ring for my whole life." A smile bloomed on her face like a flower, though there was a tinge of sadness to her expression.

"I'll do the same," I replied after a moment.

I wasn't sure if I managed to match her smile. I didn't check with *RPG Player*.



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